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VOICES SILENCED, VOICES HEARD:

EXPLORING STATUS, DISCOURSE, AND LEARNING

IN MIDDLE SCHOOL DISCUSSION GROUPS

BY

LAURA A. CHIARAVALLOTI

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

AND

RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

2012

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

OF

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ABSTRACT

Purpose:

Cooperative learning structures allow diverse groups of students to learn together while developing higher-order thinking skills, yet there are concerns that not all students' voices are being heard. The intent of this study was to discover the relationship between the instructional methodologies one teacher used to foster the development of group skills in students and the ways small discussion groups actually functioned. This study explored issues of power and status on students' learning opportunities in middle school discussion groups.

Method:

This qualitative study was conducted under an ethnographic lens using a teacher-as-researcher approach. Data were collected over one school year in a sixth grade classroom from two different class groups. Data sources included field notes, audio and video-recordings, and teacher observations of groups. A sociometric device was used to measure the peer status of the forty-eight student participants.

Thirty-one recordings of student discussion groups were transcribed and analyzed using Fairclough's (2004) methods of critical discourse analysis. Transcripts were coded for Mercer's (1995) three types of talk: disputational, cumulative, and exploratory. Student participation was measured as a percentage of total group discussion. Students' peer status, gender, and participation rates were compared.

Analysis/Results:

In one class group, a relationship was found between gender, status, and participation. Students gradually adopted the genre, discourse, and style of academic discussions. Students with low peer status increased participation rates over time, and students with high peer status decreased participation rates over time. Five student participation patterns emerged from the data: facilitating, contributing, dependent, silent, and distracting. The percentage of total group talk spent on disputational and organizational talk decreased over time while cumulative and exploratory talk increased.

Discussion:

Peer status effects were found in one class group, but these effects decreased as students developed academic discussion skills. Students' high-level thinking and talking increased over the school year. Connections can be made between instruction of academic discourse and student success in discussion groups. Examination of the five patterns of student participation provides insight into how to foster high-level discussion skills in students. The generalizability of this study to other educational settings is addressed.

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Having completed this project while working full time as a middle school teacher was an enormous challenge, and I could not have succeeded without the encouragement and support of my colleagues. My team mate of over twelve years (known here as Kurt Walker) showed amazing flexibility and filled in for me in numerous ways over the duration of my studies. Both he and my dear friend and colleague, Janet C., provided me with a shoulder to lean on and an unwavering faith in my ability to succeed. These and many other friends and colleagues at "Phelps Middle School" helped me keep my eyes on the prize, even through the most difficult of days.

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my husband and best friend, Tony Chiaravalloti, for helping me to achieve one of my life-long dreams. I cannot tell you enough how much your support and love means to me.

And to all of my students, past, present, and future—you bring me such joy and teach me something exciting and new every day.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Statement of the Problem

Classrooms today are often composed of culturally diverse groups of students, a reflection of the changing demographics of our nation. In addition to this wide array of cultural diversity, many middle school classrooms are untracked and heterogeneously grouped, adding the further complexity of broad academic differences to students' school experiences. Along with having to negotiate this cultural and academic diversity, many middle level students also become caught in peer status dilemmas that may negatively affect their opportunities to learn (Cohen & Lotan, 1997).

As a sixth-grade middle school teacher, I try to help my students negotiate this complex web of peer status and academic and social differences through the use of cooperative learning groups in my classroom. Educational research shows that opportunities to talk with peers about content under study increases academic achievement (Kagan, 1989; Johnson & Johnson, 1994, 1998; Mercer, 1995; Barnes & Todd, 1995). Yet, even after fifteen years of practice with cooperative learning methodology, I am not sure that all of my students are being given equitable opportunities to participate in critical thinking or learning when in cooperative group settings. I am concerned that not all of my students' voices are being heard.

Research shows that middle level students, the focal group of this study, do not automatically understand how to work together (Kagan, 1989; Johnson &

Johnson, 1994, 1998; Slavin, Madden, & Stevens, 1991; Knowles & Brown, 2000). Although cooperative learning structures are a significant improvement over traditional classroom methodology for providing students a greater number of opportunities to be active participants in learning (Cazden, 2001), the use of cooperative groups in classrooms does not automatically guarantee that all students will be successful in maximizing their learning. Sociocultural theory suggests there may be other powerful influences at work in small group contexts that may ultimately cause the success or failure of the group: sociocultural influences like familiarity with the dominant discourse structure of the activity, and issues of power, identity, and peer status, for example, may play a critical role (Giroux, & Simon, 1989; Cohen & Lotan, 1995, 1997; Gee & Green, 1998; Lewis, 2001).

In their 1997 study, Cohen and Lotan found evidence that "high-status students are more active than low-status students within small groups engaged in collective tasks" (p. 67). They concluded that small group structures alone are not enough to ensure equal-status participation for students, and therefore not all students are being provided with equal opportunities to learn. In order to better understand what is happening in the cooperative learning groups in my classroom, this research study seeks to discover the relationship between my instructional pedagogy in small group discussion skills and how the cooperative learning groups actually function. This study also explores peer status as it relates to the inner-workings of discussion groups in a middle school classroom, seeking a better understanding of how peer status may influence the opportunities for students to fully participate in their learning.

Justification of the Study

In an effort to take the research of Johnson and Johnson (1994, 1998), Cohen and Lotan (1995, 1997), Cohen (1998), and Lewis (2001) a step further, one purpose of this study was to explore the concept of peer status in order to better understand how status may be influencing the learning opportunities of students working in small groups in my middle school classroom. In addition, this study examined the quality of student talk occurring during small group discussions, both in terms of students using academic discourse and in terms of student learning, thereby continuing the research on talk and learning of Barnes and Todd (1995), Cazden (2001), and Mercer (1995, 2008).

Furthermore, with my focus on the function of communities of practice in learning, and my use of critical discourse analysis, this study sought to better understand how children learn "new academic social languages" in school (Gee, 2004, p. 25). Gee (2004) writes, "Immersion and participation surely play a strong role in this process, as does active intervention and help from teachers, although we know little about what are the most effective overt teacher interventions" (p. 25). In an attempt to study my teacher interventions and their impacts on students' discussion skills, I developed and implemented a year-long discussion skills curriculum to use with my students. This study provided a systematic way for me to examine the resulting small group interactions I observed in my classroom, and allowed me to explore the student learning that occurred.

Although there are many studies on cooperative learning in classrooms, studies like this one which conducted by practitioner-researchers are limited. I

conducted this qualitative study under a naturalistic, ethnographic lens in my own classroom. An underlying methodological assumption of this study is a view of practitioner research "as a legitimate form of educational inquiry" (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001, p. 299). In this study, I, in the role of a teacher-researcher, systematically examine the relationship between the instructional strategies I used to foster small group learning in my classroom and the ways in which the small groups actually functioned. Using methods of critical discourse analysis informed by the work of Fairclough (2003) and Gee (1996; 2004), I used this study to explore issues of power, status, and identity in small groups. I examined changes in my students' participation in the genre and style of academic discourse over the course of a school year. This unique dual focus on a teacher's reflections as I implemented cooperative learning activities, along with the corresponding analysis of the inter-dynamics of small groups, may provide new understandings about peer status and cooperative learning in middle school classrooms.

This study may be valuable to the educational community in several ways. It provides novice and veteran teachers with a socio-cultural theory of learning and a model curriculum designed to foster small group discussion skills in students. By providing teachers with a real-life portrayal of students who are struggling to participate in small groups, along with the subsequent reflections of the teacher-researcher, this study may help to open new dialog about the pedagogical decisions teachers make to address the needs of students who are not finding success during small group activities.

In addition, this study is valuable for educators who are seeking to increase student engagement and develop students' critical thinking skills. It provides an in-depth look at student conversations taking place in discussion groups and examines the importance of the role of the facilitator. Through an analysis of the types of talk in which small groups engage, this study also models one way to measure the level of talking, critical thinking, and learning that is taking place during middle level discussion groups. With a better understanding of the socio-cultural theories regarding the importance of peer talk and communities of practice, this study may prove valuable for educators who are interested in creating a positive classroom culture in which students gradually increase their participation in high-level academic discourse. This study may also prove informative to educators looking to better understand the influence of peer status on learning in middle school classrooms, and methods they can employ to reduce these status effects.

Although there are limitations in the generalizability of this study across classrooms and educational levels, this study is important because it provides a useful framework for educators who are interested in using academic discussion groups in classrooms populated with wide student diversity. By directly addressing the issues of power, status, and learning in classrooms, this study may provide further insights for educators who continue to negotiate the benefits and challenges of cooperative learning and peer talk in their attempts to increase student engagement and growth.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

In this chapter I explore three key areas of the research literature relevant to this study. First, I build the theoretical framework of the study by exploring a social definition of learning and by reviewing research on communities of practice. In the second section I examine the research on cooperative learning and the influence of peer status in classrooms. Finally, I close the chapter by reviewing research studies that examine the connections between talk and learning, including a look at the discourse of educational institutions.

Section I: The Theoretical Framework

A Social Theory of Learning

In 1916, John Dewey wrote "knowledge is mutually created" (p. 15). Later, in his 1938 treatise *Experience and Education*, Dewey clarified his ideas about a theory of learning in which he describes learning as more than the traditional concept of the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. When describing the traditional philosophy of education, Dewey writes, "The subject-matter of education consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore, the chief business of the school is to transmit them to the new generation" (p. 17). Traditional theories of learning such as the one Dewey criticizes depict learning as a static enterprise in which the learner plays a passive role, both in deciding what should be learned and in the learning act itself.

In contrast to this "transmission" definition of learning, Dewey theorized that learning is something that occurs within an experience. "The fundamental unity of the newer philosophy [of learning] is found in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education," (Dewey, 1938, p. 20). Dewey's work helped form the foundation of a social theory of learning—a theory explaining learning to be the result of a learner's full experience, including the interactions between an individual and the society and world in which he or she lives.

The concept of learning as a product of social interaction is described as part of Vygotsky's (1978) theory of a zone of proximal development. In this theory, there is a gap between the abilities of the learner and those of a person with more experience. As the more experienced person provides help and guidance to the learner, the gap decreases until, eventually, the learner has developed the advanced skills or knowledge and can function independently. Without the guidance of the "more capable other," Vygotsky theorized, the change in skills may not have occurred; therefore, learning is a product of the social interaction.

Yet the complex process of learning is not fully captured by looking at it simply as the product of a more knowledgeable person guiding a less knowledgeable person to a new skill or understanding. Learning has been shown to be affected by how the interaction occurs, where and when it occurs, the relationship of the people involved, who else is present at the time, the history of the people involved, the history of the place, the background each individual brings to the learning experience, the materials and objects they are using, and even the physical construction of the

setting, among many other factors. For this reason, researchers from backgrounds in sociology, linguistics, ethnography, education, psychology, and social science have developed a sociocultural theory of learning that takes into account the broader context of a learning experience such as Dewey espoused in 1916. According to sociocultural theory, teaching and learning are "regarded as culturally sensitive, interactive processes in which both the teacher and the learner play significant and critical roles. Thus, the development of children's knowledge and understanding is shaped by their interactions and relationships with others—both peers and adults" (Maloch, 2002, p. 97). In other words, the development of a child's skills in math or science may be influenced by the relationship he or she has with the teacher or the other children in the class.

Etienne Wenger (1998) broadens the social theory of learning in his book *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity.* Wenger is not wholly satisfied with the idea of learning as a product of social interactions. He writes, "Social learning theories take social interactions into account, but still from a primarily psychological perspective. They place the emphasis on interpersonal relations involving imitation and modeling, and thus focus on the study of cognitive processes by which observations can become a source of learning," (p. 280). Stemming from his work in collaboration with Jean Lave (Lave & Wenger, 1991), Wenger sees learning more accurately described as *participation*. He writes that learning "takes place through our engagement in actions and interactions, but it embeds this engagement in culture and history…it is the vehicle for the evolution of

practices and the inclusion of newcomers…while also the vehicle for the development and transmission of identities" (p. 13).

Wenger's concept of learning as participation problematizes more traditional theories of learning as an individualized cognitive activity or as something that is passively transmitted from "experts" to "novices," and it even calls into question a more progressive view of learning as a product of social interaction. Instead, Wenger's theory of learning as participation in a community of practice more fully realizes the complex influences of the social world on an individual's ability and opportunity to learn.

Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) contrast learning as an internalized cognitive event with "learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concern[ing] the whole person acting in the world" (p. 49). They discuss learning as a "situated activity" in which learners "participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (p. 29). Wenger's (1998) "community of practice" begins with the assumption that participation in social practice is the primary process by which we learn and grow and develop our identities.

Cooperative learning activities and small group discussions are integral to developing rich learning communities, or "communities of practice" in classrooms. Lave (1996) provides a clear example of using the concept of a "gradual change in participation" as evidence of learning in school as she recounts the work by Margaret Carlock with "non-wizard" chemistry students. Carlock's approach worked so well

that students began achieving high scores on national tests in record numbers. Lave describes Carlock's approach:

> The problem as the teacher construed it was to figure out how to make it possible for students to participate intensively in chemistry as part of their collective identity-changing lives. This involved a complex process of transforming the chemistry lab space into one whose social organization was very much shaped by the students, with laboratory and class work collaboratively developed with students, through tutoring arrangements that created opportunities for kids to engage with chemistry first for purposes of helping others and through that, to deepen their engagement with chemistry as an object of study. (p. 160)

Carlock suggested that one way to evaluate the results (in terms of how well students were learning the material) was by discovering how much talk there was about chemistry among students in the cafeteria. Lave (1996) writes that students in Carlock's classes would not have been successful with chemistry without her "knowledge of chemistry and of how to make it available to students," but Carlock did not "teach" chemistry in the way we tend to think of teaching. Instead, Carlock made chemistry the central focus of a community of active learners, where through tutoring others, the students increased their own understanding of the material, and over time became greater participants in the "doing" of chemistry in the classroom.

From Social to Sociocultural

From the success story of Carlock's chemistry students, the social nature of learning is again made visible. Catherine Fosnot (1996), in her work discussing the

theory of constructivism as a theory of knowledge and learning, writes that learning is "internally constructed and socially and culturally mediated" (p. ix). Fosnot views the classroom as a "minisociety, a community of learners engaged in activity, discourse, and reflection" (p. ix). The description of Fosnot's "minisociety" captures Carlock's classroom of chemistry students.

Cynthia Lewis (2001), however, writes that social constructivism, based in psychology, still places too much emphasis on the internal structures of making meaning (p. 11). As shown in her work on the literacy practices of a mixed fifth and sixth-grade classroom, Lewis (2001) demonstrates that reading and writing cannot be only defined as individually learned, cognitive acts; instead, a child learns to read, write, and interpret text through a variety of socially mediated literary activities, such as parent or teacher read-alouds, peer-led literature discussion groups, teacher-led literature discussion groups, oral book talks, and independent reading experiences. A more accurate theory of learning, as Lewis suggests, is social constructionism, a learning theory grounded in sociology which views learning as a blend of the internal and external, where "meaning is constructed by, between, and for the members of a social community" (p. 11). Again, Carlock's chemistry classroom comes to mind.

Lewis (2001) clarifies the importance of viewing learning through a sociocultural lens when she reveals that there are "complicated social and power relations at work in the classroom" and that "literacy practices are regulated through discourses related to social class, education, and disciplinary institutions" (p. 11). For example, Lewis writes:

> Middle-class students possessed social and interpretive aptitudes and dispositions that matched those of the classroom, whereas working-class students possessed aptitudes and dispositions suited to their families and communities…the shaping influence of social class was obvious in the data …and [the data] show that the working-class students were not as successful academically or socially as the middle-class students. (p. 86)

In addition to the influence of social class, Lewis' (2001) findings also reveal three other factors that have significant influence on power and status effects in the classroom, factors that further impact learning for students. "These three conditions, *ability, age,* and *gender*, surfaced repeatedly in the data, representing a challenge to the enactment of classroom culture and making visible differential status and power within the classroom, and consequently, within peer-led discussions" (italics original, p. 86). As Lewis' study reveals, many sociocultural elements influence the "community of practice" of a middle school classroom, thereby potentially influencing the opportunities children have to participate in classroom activities, and thus, to learn.

James Gee summarizes Lewis' findings in his forward to her book: "There is another way to look at literacy beyond seeing it in terms of mental processing and individual skills…In this perspective, reading and writing are not primarily mental acts; they are primarily socially situated acts" (in Lewis, 2001, p. xvii). Students in Lewis' study reported that their experiences in literature groups were "shaped in part by other members of their literature groups…students reported acting differently in different groups, depending on their sometimes complicated relationships with group

members or their teacher" (p. 178). When learning is understood as a socially mediated act, then it becomes clear how a learner's changes in behavior or inability to focus on the task due to the social context may influence the quality of the learning experience.

In their work *Reframing Sociocultural Research on Literacy*, Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) broaden even further the sociocultural theory of learning. In this text the authors acknowledge that sociocultural theory "offers us a way of recognizing the learning processes and practices associated with reading and writing," but they believe that "sociocultural theory has tended to shy away from broader political and ideological issues" (p. vii). The authors, therefore, develop a new lens under which to study learning called critical sociocultural theory, which attempts to more "fully understand the relationship between power, ideology, and schooling" (p. 3).

Lewis and Moje (2007) analyze classroom transcripts in their study of the roles of identity, agency, and power in a child's opportunities to learn. "Critical sociocultural perspectives may be the only available tools for demonstrating how youths' opportunities to learn are both supported and constrained by everyday interactions of students and teachers and by the systems and structures that shape the institution of schooling" (p. xiii). In Lewis and Moje's study, the authors analyze transcripts from literature discussion groups discussing the text *The Outsiders*, by S.E. Hinton. Echoing ideas about "communities of practice" from Lave and Wenger (1991), Lewis and Moje define the classroom as a "discourse community—a grouping of people that share ways of knowing, thinking, believing, acting, and communicating" (p. 16). Lewis and Moje reveal a "curious paradox of learning" in

that, in order for children to have opportunities to learn in a classroom, they first have to get access to the discourse community of the classroom, but children do not always have "access to and control of the tools, resources, and identities necessary for full participation" (p. 16). Lewis and Moje summarize:

> If one accepts that learning is always situated within discourse communities or is about gaining access to communities, as well as that discourse communities struggle over access to resources and that people within discourse communities are not always viewed or treated equally, one must then acknowledge that learning is shaped and mired in power relations. (p. 17)

If a gradual increase in participation is one measure of learning, then the negotiation of the various power and status influences within a classroom, and the potential lack of access to the discourses of "school," may result in some students not participating as much as they might otherwise do, and therefore might be significantly impacting their opportunities to learn.

Participation and Talk = Learning

Hicks (1995) makes clear a three-way relationship between participation, discourse, and learning in her review of the research on discourse as a mediator of children's learning. In reexamining Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, Hicks notes that Vygotsky's "sociocultural and sociohistorical theories of learning were grounded in his interest in how language and other culturally significant symbolic systems mediated human thinking" (p. 55). Hicks describes Vygotsky's zone of proximal development as a scaffold for learning in which, as a child and parent or teacher work together on an activity, the adult (Vygotsky's "more capable

peer") structures the activity and provides verbal directions to guide the child through a task. By repeating the activity over time, Hicks explains, the adult provides fewer scaffolds and the child's level of understanding increases (p. 55). Hicks echoes Lave and Wenger's legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice when she writes, "Through her or his repeated engagement in activity that is often mediated by discourse, the child's situational understandings are shaped so that she or he can be a full participant in a social world" (p. 55). In this explanation, Hicks hints at the importance of discourse to the learning experience.

In classrooms, the "social worlds" of schools, children learn the academic discourse of "math" or "science" through "their repeated participation in meaningful social activity" structured by the teacher and engaged in with peers (Hicks, 1995, p. 59). At home, many young children and parents engage in a nightly routine of reading aloud and talking about books, a discourse of literacy. Panofsky (1994) writes, "These uses of language comprise an accumulated knowledge, built up over several years of joint book-reading experiences, which the young learner brings to her or his school reading instruction" (p. 224). Once a child is in school, where literacy and the ways of participation in literacy acts is seen as a valued practice, Panofsky writes, "Access to opportunities for participation in such valued social practices is critical" (1994, p. 239). Children who have had the experience of regular read-alouds with parents come to school equipped with the "tools" needed to participate in literacy activities, but not all children come to school with these culturally valued practices. Panofsky argues that educators can "foster children's interaction with the

language of valued social practices" in order to provide all children with access to literacy activities in school.

Similar to Panofsky's study, Lewis (2001) reveals in her study of literacy practices in an upper elementary school classroom that not all children come to school with the discourse tools that would allow them to participate in certain academic activities, like a read-aloud or a conversation about books. When children do not know the appropriate discourse or social practices of an activity, they may not be able to participate. If learning is defined as the increase in participation in a community of practice, then students who cannot participate may not be learning. Therefore, as suggested by Panofsky, it is important for educators to explicitly identify and model for students the necessary discourse tools that will give them access to the learning community of the classroom and classroom structures such as cooperative learning groups.

For the purpose of this study, the "community of practice" is defined as the students and teachers in my sixth grade English language arts and social studies classes and the classroom activities taking place. Following in the tradition of Lave and Wenger (1991), learning in this study is defined as an "increased participation in the community of practice." Further discussion on the links between talking and learning are found in Section III of this chapter.

Section II: Studies on Group Work in Classrooms

Benefits and Shortcomings of Cooperative Learning

The system of ability grouping or tracking was an attempt by schools to provide instruction to meet each student's individual needs in the most efficient way

possible (Cohen and Lotan, 1997). According to Cohen and Lotan (1997), "teachers and administrators try to deal with the differences in achievement by dividing students into ability groups, streams, or tracks where they believe that a single instructional treatment will work for everyone in the group" (p. 6). Although tracking and ability grouping began as a way to combat the growing achievement gap by offering specialized instruction to those who needed it most, there is now evidence that students in low-ability groups sometimes suffer in the placement, and may not be offered opportunities for the types of high-level thinking provided to their more successful peers (Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Slavin, Madden, & Stevens, 1991; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). As Cohen and Lotan (1997) write, tracking and ability grouping may actually be "ensuring that differences in social class become differences in school success [because] the lower-ability groups and tracks contain a disproportionate number of children from lower social classes" (p. 6).

For these reasons, tracking and ability grouping are being eliminated in some of our nation's schools to be replaced with heterogeneous grouping. But with this change in structure comes a new host of problems for teachers now faced with the dilemma of how to meet the needs of diverse classroom groups. Cooperative learning is one instructional methodology that is meant to help teachers adjust to the instructional challenges posed by heterogeneous student groups.

For over thirty years, cooperative learning has been successfully implemented in elementary and secondary schools around the nation (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). A review of the research suggests that participation in cooperative learning activities may lead to stronger academic achievement, a greater retention of knowledge, a

heightened capacity for logical reasoning and creative thinking, and a developed ability to persevere in the face of difficult tasks (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). Cooperative learning structures can provide students with comfortable settings in which to talk about what they are learning with their peers, and thus foster the development of higher level thinking and learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Kagan, 1989; Slavin, Madden, & Stevens, 1991).

Traditionally, teachers have used a competitive classroom structure that Kagan (1989) refers to as Whole Class Question-Answer, a type of traditional lesson structure also described by Cazden (2001) as the "the three-part sequence of teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation (IRE) or teacher feedback (IRF)" (p. 30). According to Kagan (1989), this more traditional instructional methodology sometimes creates competition and disharmony in a classroom as students seek and win praise from the teacher on an individual basis. Cazden (2001) suggests that students have fewer opportunities to participate in learning when only one student is interacting with the teacher at any given time while the class passively watches.

Cooperative learning, on the other hand, has been hailed as alternative classroom structure that allows students to learn how to interact with peers while also encouraging more students to participate in learning at any one time. Plus, cooperative learning groups have been shown to remove some of the competitive tension to which Kagan (1989) referred, thereby making the learning experience more inviting for all students. "How teachers structure student-student interaction patterns has a lot to say about how well students learn, how they feel about school and the teacher, how they feel about each other, and how much self-esteem they have"

(Johnson & Johnson, 1994, p. 1). For several decades, many educators have successfully used cooperative learning structures in their classrooms to achieve their goals of fostering interpersonal communication between students, encouraging an appreciation of diversity, developing creativity and higher order thinking skills, and promoting engaging learning experiences for students.

However, middle level students, the focal group of this study, do not automatically understand how to work together (Kagan, 1989; Knowles & Brown, 2000). Although cooperative learning structures are a significant improvement over the traditional IRE methodology for providing more students with a greater number of opportunities to be active participants in learning, the use of cooperative groups in classrooms does not automatically guarantee that all students will be successful in maximizing their learning. As Johnson and Johnson (1994) note, "Knowing that cooperative learning can significantly increase student achievement…when properly implemented does not mean, however, that all operationalizations of cooperative learning will be effective or that all operationalizations will be equally effective," (p.12) Researchers who have studied cooperative learning suggest that specific learning structures may have different outcomes: there are many cooperative learning structures to choose from, and teachers may not always choose the best structure for the task (Kagan, 1989; Johnson & Johnson, 1994). When teachers are skilled at using a variety of cooperative learning structures, students become familiar with what is expected of them in each cooperative learning structure. The class will then transition from whole group to small group activities with ease, and the focus will be on the

content under study rather than on students spending class time trying to figure out what to do in their groups (Kagan, 1989).

Yet, while using the best cooperative learning structure for the task at hand is essential, sociocultural theory suggests there may be other powerful influences at work in small group contexts that can ultimately cause the success or failure of the group: sociocultural influences like familiarity with the dominant discourse structure of the activity, or issues of power, identity, and status, for example, may play a critical role. Quoting Florio-Ruane, Lewis (2001) writes, "In a social world that is unequal, you don't get a democratic or open conversation simply by saying that everybody's free to talk" (p. 177). Based on the results of her own study, Lewis clarifies, "Both the literature on student-centered classrooms and much of the literature on critical pedagogy tend to idealize the communities created in classrooms where teachers release power to their students… however, when the teacher gives up power, particular students will take up the slack" (p. 177). Similarly, Cohen and Lotan (1997) argue that in a heterogeneous classroom the powerful social forces at work outside of the classroom are recreated within the classroom, status-producing forces such as socio-economic condition, ethnicity, immigrant-status, and gender differences. Cohen and Lotan (1997) caution educators:

> Educational reformers infer that doing away with tracking and grouping will do much to solve the problems of inequity within schools. But even if one were to do away with tracking and grouping, there still would be differential responses to different levels of achievement *within* the heterogeneous classroom…Social systems in heterogeneous classrooms have the potential to

> recreate a new status order that reflects, at least in part, the old status order of tracking and ability grouping. (p. 7)

As demonstrated by Lewis (2001), Maloch (2002), Evans (2002), and Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007), social forces in the classroom may potentially fuel power and status differences that can influence student participation in small groups, thereby hindering learning for some students.

Social Status Effects on Opportunities to Learn

It is important to recognize that classrooms are microcosms of our larger society. Students bring with them to school the biases and stereotypes they see modeled by the adults in their lives, portrayed in the media, and discovered in their daily experiences. Fecho and Allen (2005) write, "The world outside the classroom transacts daily with the world inside the classroom and each reflects, shapes, and is shaped by the other" (p. 213). Just because "societal monsters" like racism, classism, and sexism are not openly discussed in the classroom, people often make the mistake of believing they do not exist there (Fecho and Allen, 2005, p. 213). These outside experiences manifest themselves in classroom as children organize themselves into social status hierarchies – something that happens whether the teacher is aware of it or not. In fact, argue Fecho and Allen (2005), "too few educators have considered the ways students' experiences—e.g., cultural identity, socioeconomic circumstances, family language and culture, political issues, religion—transact with their efforts and opportunities to learn" (p. 213). Educators may become so focused on the curricula that is to be covered or the standardized tests that students need to be ready for, that the broader context of students' learning experiences goes unnoticed.

In their book *Peer Power: Preadolescent Culture and Identity*, Adler and Adler (1998) write, "One of the strongest dimensions of life that preadolescents wrestle with is popularity" (p. 38). Similar to the adult world, children organize themselves into a stratified social order, and this is often clearly apparent at school. Patricia and Kevin Adler, two professors of sociology, spent eight years in the role of parents-as-researchers conducting an in-depth ethnographic study of the peer culture of preadolescent children (children aged 8 – 12). Their study was conducted in their predominantly white, middle- to upper-class city with a population of ninety-thousand. Adler and Adler's work provides information about peer culture and peer status generated directly from the source—actual interviews with hundreds of children, along with years of observational data collected using ethnographic methods, most of it collected in schools. According to Adler and Adler (1998), "Children's knowledge of social position is influenced by their conception of status, which may be defined as popularity, prestige, or 'social honor'" (p. 38). Furthermore, regardless of where their conception of status is coming from, children are aware of their social status even before they get to middle school.

As Adler and Adler's (1998) study reveals, there are differences in the factors affecting girls' and boys' popularity and status. For boys, the major factor affecting popularity is athletic ability, followed closely by a concept of "toughness." Toughness is related to a boys' ability to distance himself from authority and is evidenced in "acting out" behaviors (p. 41). The most popular boys in upper elementary school are often those boys who most frequently get in trouble. Factors that could be highly stigmatizing to boys of this age group are cross-gender

relationships and academic performance. "Peers often viewed intergender activities as romances, which made them highly stigmatized and therefore difficult to maintain," write Adler & Adler (1998, p. 44). Once at the sixth grade level, however, the "popular" boys can get away with relationships with girls, and are even given higher status for it (Adler & Adler, 1998).

As for the status associated with academic performance, Adler and Adler found that "at all ages, boys who were skewed toward either end of the academic continuum suffered socially" (p. 45). In fact, good academic performance "changed over the course of their elementary years for the majority of boys from a positive influence to a potentially degrading stigma" (p. 45). To clarify, the Adlers' study suggests that for boys of upper elementary/middle school age, academic achievement and good grades do not generally provide higher status with their peers. In fact, although somewhat tolerated in the lower grades, by the time they are in upper elementary school or middle school, being a "good student" in school may be seen as "not cool" for boys. If high academic achievement is on the low side of the "cool factor" scale, then boys in school may have to constantly wrangle with the competing forces of the expectations of their friends and their teachers; given the importance of popularity to preadolescents, the expectations of friends is the likely winner. This factor could help to explain why some boys find it difficult to participate fully and appropriately in cooperative learning groups in classrooms; for some boys, it just is not "cool" to "do school."

Although there are some similarities, Adler and Adler (1998) found that the factors affecting social status for girls are different than for boys. For example, a

girl's family background is one of the most powerful forces influencing her popularity (p. 47). A higher socio-economic level gives a girl higher peer status. Physical appearance and social development are also influential in determining a girl's social status. The most precocious girls achieve dominant social positions. According to Adler and Adler, precocity refers to "girls' early attainment of adult social characteristics, such as the ability to express themselves verbally, an understanding of intergroup relationships, skills at convincing others to see things their way, and an interest in more mature social concerns, such as makeup and boys" (p. 51). In other words, girls with more sophisticated interpersonal skills tend to be more popular and have higher status than their less mature peers.

Similar to boys, intergender relationships hold the potential to increase or decrease a girl's social status. For example, if a low-status girl is seen with a higher-status boy, her social status increases. However, if a high-status girl is caught with a lower-status boy, it is "social suicide" (p. 53). In contrast to the impact academic performance has on the status of boys, Adler & Adler's study shows that academic performance for girls does not seem to make much of a difference in their social status, with one striking exception. In schools with homogeneous groupings for ability levels, which tend to be found in the upper elementary or middle school grades, the learning group a girl belongs to "affected the influence of academic stratification of girls' cliques" (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 54). In other words, in schools that use tracking or other ability groupings, such as in math for example, girls' social groups may become stratified not only based on social class, but based on academic achievement as well. In schools that use heterogeneous grouping practices,

however, girls' social groups may include girls with a wider diversity of academic abilities.

Another factor contributing to peer status for children in schools is cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) uses the concept of "cultural capital" to help explain the construction of the social world and the creation of social classes. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is accumulated in three ways: in its embodied state—the "long-lasting dispositions of mind and body," which are the trends in thinking that come from long-lasting family values, such as a value in the arts or education; in its objectified state—made up of cultural objects such as books, artwork, and in today's world, computers; and in its institutionalized state—relating to a person's level of education and field of work (p. 243). Lewis (2001) refers to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as "the status [of] middle-class knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education" (p. 160). Bourdieu's cultural capital becomes a factor for students in school because they enter school with certain values and ways of thinking about the world that come from their family backgrounds. As Panofsky (1994) demonstrated in her study of parent-child read-alouds, some children may come to school feeling quite comfortable with the discourses of literacy and formal education, and they may view literacy and education as inherently valuable because these are things clearly valued at home. Since literacy and education are valued at school, students who come to school already comfortable with the discourses and activities surrounding literacy and formal education may find themselves to have greater cultural capital, and hence more status, than some of their peers.

Another researcher interested in the influences of power and status on children's learning experiences in school, Margaret Finders (1997) conducted a year-long study of the literacies of junior high school girls. Situated in an ethnically homogeneous school in a primarily middle-class community in the mid-west, Finder's study revealed that a family's socio-economic situation can significantly affect the status of girls in school. Even though the community she worked in was predominantly middle-class, there was one large trailer park of working-class and low-income families in the district of the school Finders was visiting. From this study, Finders discovered socio-economic background and peer status to have a large impact on the ability of girls to participate in some of the literacy events constructed by the school.

One example of a literacy event that not all the girls participated in involved the arrival of the annual yearbooks. At the school in the study, this was one of the most-looked-forward to, biggest social events of the year. To Finders' surprise, almost 25% of the student body did not purchase a yearbook, and she felt that the "socioeconomic status of families may have been [the] critical issue" (p. 36). Yet as Finders (1997) writes:

> While economic resources played a major part in determining who would participate more fully in ways the school had constructed participation, there was much evidence to suggest that an equal if not greater factor was the circulation of what Bourdieu calls cultural capital: the attitudes, beliefs, cultural background, knowledge, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next. (p. 37)

Finders goes on to suggest that the children of families with less cultural capital, such as families from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds, from working-class backgrounds, or families of immigrant/minority groups, may not have valued the institution of school and "doing school" enough for their children to see the yearbook or other school events as important, or may simply have not had the financial resources to allow their children to participate in some of the events. But in the school in Finders' study, the yearbook was valued by the majority of the student population, and therefore became a symbol of cultural capital and peer status.

In her study of the power, status, and cultural norms woven into classroom life, Lewis (2001) writes, "Gender, age, ability, popularity, social class, race—these identity markers intersect and compete to complicate life in school and create the social drama that shapes the local scene of the classroom" (p. 51). In her year-long study, Lewis follows a diverse group of five focal students through literacy practices in a mixed fifth and sixth-grade classroom. Her study includes two sixth graders, a boy and a girl "who were powerful both socially and academically;" two fifth graders, both boys, "who were not academic and social leaders, but who spoke, sometimes with power, from the margins;" and a fifth grade girl "whose power ebbed and flowed and whose role within the classroom remained in flux" (p. 21). Of the five students, the two fifth grade boys were from working class backgrounds and of middle to low academic ability. The two sixth graders were from middle class backgrounds and of high academic ability. The fifth grade girl was also middle class and of high academic ability.

Lewis observed many different literacy practices taking place during the year she spent in this classroom. She collected and analyzed data regarding how the social status of these five focal children may have influenced their "interpretive competence" and access to the rituals of the literacy practices, their participation in literature discussion groups, and their overall opportunities to learn in the context of the classroom. On the topic of peer-led literature discussion groups, Lewis concludes:

> The decentering of authority that occurred in peer-led groups had its advantages, but it had its drawbacks as well. These drawbacks included the marginalization of students who were seen as having less social and interpretive competence, the recentering of authority in the form of students who embraced or accepted the role of teacher, and the emphasis placed on social roles at the expense of textual interpretation. (p. 178)

As understood under a sociocultural theory of learning, everything about an experience will have an effect on a child's ability to learn. If, during peer-led groups, there are some students who are not openly invited to participate, or who feel in some way awkward or apart from the group, it is likely these children will not be fully engaged with the text or task at hand. In addition, as Lewis notes, if some children are more focused on playing a social role than they are on actively engaging with the text, then they, too, may be missing an opportunity to learn.

Gender may also have an impact on a child's status in school, as intimated by Adler and Adler's (1998) research discussed earlier in this section. It can be argued that in American society, boys benefit more than girls from a system of privilege

established by the dominant culture (Gilligan, 1982; Finders, 1997; Lewis, 2001). In an article exploring the differences in education for boys and girls in co-ed and same-sex settings, Campbell and Wahl (2002) write:

> A final assumption, often unstated, is that in this society higher status and privilege are associated with class (high socioeconomic status), race (white), and gender (male). The highest-status students in coed classes tend to be white, male, and upper-middle-class; they in turn reap the benefits in the form of higher achievement and participation. (p. 727).

Small groups composed of mixed genders may not invite equitable participation to all members of the group. If, as Campbell and Wahl (2002) discuss, "stereotypical gender expectations" are frequently recreated in the classroom, there may be fewer opportunities for girls to fully participate in learning activities, especially girls from lower socio-economic or ethnic minority backgrounds (p. 726). However, the authors caution that single-sex groups or classrooms may not be the answer either, as the status hierarchy of class and race will still recreate itself in a same-sex group.

Karen Evans (2002), in her study of fifth graders' perceptions of how their literature groups were functioning, found that the gender makeup of the groups influenced how students participated in the discussions. Evans reports, "Discussion groups that struggled almost always were mixed-gender groups who divided along gender lines" (p. 59). Evans describes the struggles as taking several forms, with either one gender or the other refusing to participate, or with the boys and girls splitting themselves into two smaller groups and working at opposite ends of a table. Evans writes, "Even the groups' nonverbal behavior communicated this 'us versus

them' mentality…they often refused to look at each other, and the videotapes were filled with glares and disgusted looks directed toward the other gender" (p. 60). In interviews with the students, Evans found that both girls and boys reported that the reason same-gender groups worked better was because they felt more comfortable. "The students' comments reveal that not only did they feel more comfortable in same-gender groups, they felt this comfort level helped them more fully participate in the discussion" (p. 61). As seen in the study conducted by Adler and Adler (1998), boys and girls are generally uncomfortable with each other during early adolescence, and to be seen interacting with a member of the opposite gender often puts a child's social status in jeopardy. The Adlers' work helps to clarify one potential reason for gender having such an impact on the function of small groups.

Echoing the findings of Evans, in her study of a fifth and sixth-grade classroom, Lewis (2001) saw evidence of gender influencing the willingness of students to participate. One focal student, David, was at first willing and eager to engage in discussion with his teacher and his peers about the class texts. But by the end of sixth grade, as seventh grade was approaching, David "performed his masculinity related to literacy in ways more aligned to the other boys in the class" (p. 156), further exemplifying what Adler and Adler revealed about the relationship between boys' status and their academic achievement. Lewis writes:

> It should come as no surprise that the gendered culture of the classroom was shaped by masculinist culture outside the classroom. The larger culture of dominant norms beyond the classroom is one in which male violence toward

females is widespread, males hold more economic and cultural capital, and male ways of knowing, acting, believing, and being are normative. (p. 156).

Similarly, in Finder's (1997) work, the masculinity of outside culture is in evidence, and gender is given different status treatments in the classroom. Finders reports teachers treating students differently based on gender, such as giving all of their attention to disruptive boys (who, as noted in Adler and Adler, gain status from acting out), and using girls as mother-figures in small groups, or as "spacers" between boys, as if the role of girls in school is to be "good" and help keep boys in line by acting like "little mothers" (p. 124). Finders writes, "So it seems that the institutional design for a good girl positioned her to be used at best as a nurturer and at worst as nothing more than a physical barrier, a 'spacer'" (p. 125). Finders criticizes schools for reinforcing stereotypes of both males and females by giving the girls these kinds of roles, even though this is done unintentionally. "We understand what this design does to boys who internalize such gender-specific messages. If girls are nice and kind…boys must be the opposite. Boys are taught that disruptive behavior is acceptable male behavior. Boys are taught the role of girls is to serve them" (p. 125). Even when unintentional, the choices and behaviors of teachers regarding how they treat children have a large impact on a child's learning experiences in school.

According to Gallas (1997), the development of gender identity in classrooms is connected directly to each social moment for children. Participating in a social activity is part of the way children experiment with and respond to the stereotyped gender roles of our culture. Adopting expected gender roles and behaviors is one way children work to control the power dynamics in the classroom. Vocal, disruptive

boys and "good" girls both wield power in the classroom, just in different ways. "The right to speak out loud and be heard, a dynamic that only naïve observers place completely within the control of the teacher, in reality resides more powerfully within the social dynamics of the peer group" (Gallas, 1997, p.10). If, as Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest, learning is defined as greater participation over time, then it is of great importance for educators to be aware of the influence of peer status on student learning experiences, and to foster a classroom climate in which all students are provided with the tools and the opportunities to participate.

Elizabeth Cohen (1994) writes of other status indicators that can have an impact on learning, even within small groups of students who have been carefully prepared for cooperative learning tasks. Cohen warns educators to not mistake "civility and friendliness" for equal-status within a group (p. 28). In fact, Cohen makes clear that there is no such thing as an "equal-status" group in a classroom. Echoing the ideas of Bourdieu (1986), Cohen explains that classrooms exhibit "status distinctions made on the basis of social class, race, ethnic group, and sex" (1994, p. 32). Cohen notes that in many Western societies, it is "better to be of a higher social class, white, and male than it is to be of a lower social class, black or brown, or female" (p. 32). Furthermore, she suggests that "in our culture, people of color are generally expected to be less competent on intellectual tasks than whites," (p. 34). In addition to these sociocultural distinctions, Cohen makes a clear reference to reading ability as a sign of status:

> Children (and some teachers) see reading ability as an index of something more general than a specific, relatively mechanical skill. Reading ability is

> used as an index of how smart a student is. Thus good readers expect to be good at a wide range of school tasks, and poor readers expect to do poorly at just as wide a range of schoolwork. (p. 30)

Cohen found that children who were good readers tended to have higher status in groups and "tended to be more dominant [even during] a game requiring no academic skills" (p. 31).

It is true, however, that reading fluency is not the sole indicator of intelligence, and many children who have high aptitudes in math, science, art, music, or social studies may have low academic status with their peers simply due to a perceived lack of skill in reading. Having low academic or social status in a group may then impact a child's opportunities to participate in the task at hand. Elizabeth Cohen and Rachel Lotan conducted studies of status effects in classrooms for over twenty years. In their 1997 study, Cohen and Lotan found evidence that "high-status students are more active than low-status students within small groups engaged in collective tasks" (p. 67). They concluded that small group structures alone are not enough to ensure equal-status participation for students, and therefore not all students are being provided with equal opportunities to learn.

Working in elementary and middle-level schools in southern California in the 1970s and 1980s, Cohen and Lotan observed the challenges placed on teachers and students as schools began de-tracking and grouping students heterogeneously. A particular challenge for teachers and students came from the increase in population of immigrant children in California public schools at the time. Suddenly teachers found themselves faced with the daunting task of teaching diverse groups of learners with

different levels of facility with English, different backgrounds in formal literacy practices of school, and different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Cooperative learning as an instructional methodology became an important tool for teachers in these schools, but it also came with problems of unequal participation due to status effects.

Devising a treatment for status effects in classrooms called Complex Instruction, Cohen and Lotan studied the effects on participation and learning of three different types of status characteristics before and after treatment using a series of regression analyses. Cohen and Lotan (1997) write, "Status characteristics are agreed-upon social rankings where people believe it is better to be in the high than the low state" (p. 64). The three status effects they studied included what they termed diffuse status characteristics (minority status, gender, social class, or linguistic status), specific status characteristics (specific skills, training, or occupations) and local status characteristics (peer status and academic status). Unlike diffuse and specific status characteristics which come from general culture, Cohen and Lotan explain that peer and academic status characteristics depend on the local culture of the school. "The definitions of high and low states on these status characteristics and their accompanying expectations come from local school culture—beliefs about what it means to be 'smart' in school and what it means to be popular and socially desirable" (p. 64). Indeed, even though Adler and Adler (1998) report that for many boys, peer status decreases when academic status increases, the actual impact of high academic achievement on a boy's social status may vary based on the community in which he lives or the group of students in his class.

Dewey (1938) made clear that it is the job of educators to not just teach children the set curricula, but also to develop well-rounded, open-minded citizens capable of critical thinking, problem solving, tolerance, and collaboration. Therefore, as Fecho and Allen (2005) argue, there is a "critical need to gain deeper social-contextual understandings of the ways issues of power, equity, and social justice transact with literacy in classrooms" (p. 214). Developing a better understanding of peer culture and how it may be affecting learning opportunities for children in school may be one way to address this critical need. In addition, a clearer grasp of what happens in cooperative learning groups when they are productive and successful may offer helpful insights into ways educators might work to offset peer status effects during small group activities.

Conditions for Successful and Productive Group Work

According to Cohen (1994), a "productive" small group is a group engaged in conceptual learning and high order thinking, and in which equal-status interactions occur between group members (p. 3). Mercer (1995) also spoke about talking with "someone whom you can treat as a social and intellectual equal" as a good way to test how well you understand something (p. 89). But what if the members of a group do not have equal social or academic status, as is likely in today's heterogeneously diverse classrooms?

As discussed earlier in this chapter, years of research on cooperative learning have documented that cooperative learning is not automatic when children work together (Slavin, Madden, & Stevens, 1991; Kagan, 1979; Johnson & Johnson, 1989, Barnes & Todd, 1995). Research shows, for example, that children need to learn social skills

before they work in cooperative groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Cohen, 1994a, Barnes & Todd, 1995); that peer status can negatively affect the learning environment in a classroom or small group (Cohen, 1994a; Cohen, 1998; Cohen & Lotan, 1995); and that "the advantages that can theoretically be obtained from cooperative learning can actually be obtained only under certain conditions," (Cohen, 1994a). Cohen (1994a) discusses conditions that are most likely to promote productive small groups (productive here meaning a group that has equitable participation and reaches higher level thinking in the accomplishment of a task), and conditions that are least likely to promote productive groups. A summary of her findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Conditions Mostly Likely/Least Likely to Promote Productive Small Groups

Conditions *Most Likely* to Promote Productive Small Groups	**Conditions *Least Likely* to Promote Productive Small Groups**
• A "legitimate group task" (p. 8) • Use of group roles, such as a facilitator, or structuring the task in a scripted way • Explicit teaching & modeling of discussion & cooperation skills • Training students to be aware of their interpersonal group processes • Peer status neutralized/addressed in some way • Avoiding "equal" numbers in group composition, like ½ girls, ½ boys • Making a clear link between group process skills and the team's task goal • A teacher willing to delegate authority to students	• Collaborative seatwork instead of a true "group task" • A sharp division of labor – may actually inhibit necessary interaction for higher-level thinking • When teachers do nothing to structure the interaction of the group • Peer status problems left ignored • Competition and rewards • Lack of training and practice with discussion and cooperation skills • A teacher too focused on supervision and control

Cohen (1994b) elaborates on each of these conditions in her book *Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*. In this book, Cohen not only explains the difference between a "legitimate group task" and "cooperative seatwork," she also provides many different clear examples used in classrooms. Likewise, in both her article (Cohen, 1994a) and her book (Cohen, 1994b), Cohen provides details to help educators identify and address peer status effects in small groups.

Echoing Cohen, Barnes and Todd (1995) demonstrate that both social skills and facility with a group discussion format are necessary for productive small groups during a study of the interactions within small groups at two junior highs. Barnes and Todd (1995) write:

> Our concern lies not with social skills for their own sake but only with the extent to which they contribute to a group's ability to learn from discussions. Each group is simultaneously negotiating social relationships and attempting the given task; if the former preempts their time and attention, little learning will go on. (p. 50)

As Barnes and Todd's (1995) transcripts reveal, although middle level students are sometimes capable of negotiating the social dynamics of small groups, they are not always successful. Therefore, as Cohen has also made clear, discussion skills, cooperation skills, and awareness of interpersonal interactions within a group are all skills that must be explicitly taught and practiced with students.

Through their analysis of forty-five transcripts of group discussions, Barnes and Todd also discovered that middle level students are capable of a wide variety of

cognitive skills and discussion skills. However, their study also demonstrates that groups of students who are not as facile with discussion skills specific to a task do not always reach the same level of higher-order thinking as groups that are skilled in that type of discourse. For example, Barnes and Todd (1995) point out that students are so accustomed to finding the "right answer" in school-related tasks, that when a group of students is presented with a task that requires "exploratory talk" or discussion, they may falter and be unsure of how to proceed with the task. Barnes and Todd (1995) write:

> We have no doubt of the importance in the success of small group work of the students' wider experience of school [and] their previous experience of exploratory talk…[yet] it sometimes happens that particular students show no comprehension of what discussion involves and either allocate decisions to group members to make individually or adopt a television interview format which leads to statements without any interaction or exchange of views. (p. 100).

By the end of their analysis, Barnes and Todd had identified specific social skills and discussion skills that the students exhibited that positively impacted the productivity of their small groups. However, these authors did not look closely at what the teachers of these students did, if anything, to prepare the students for group work of this type.

In summary, research shows that the influence of social status and classroom culture on learning opportunities for children may have a more significant impact on learning than once believed. In today's climate of teacher accountability, high-stakes

standardized testing, and "no child left behind" philosophy, it may be more important than ever before to better understand how educators might address status effects in classrooms and within cooperative learning groups in order to foster greater participation and learning opportunities for all children.

Section III: Research on Talk and Learning

Talk = A Social Construction of Knowledge

Neil Mercer (1995) describes knowledge as not just "an individual mental possession," but as a "joint possession, because it can very effectively be shared" (p. 1). In fact, "amongst all living things [humans] are uniquely equipped to pool our mental resources and solve problems—to create knowledge—through joint mental effort" (p. 1). Sometimes new ideas are created through group brainstorming or collaboration, as might happen in business, manufacturing, or construction, in order to solve problems that come up on a project. Often, as explained by Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, a "more capable other" helps a novice to develop his or her knowledge and understanding; what Mercer calls "the guided construction of knowledge" (1995, p. 1). In each case, knowledge is created through talk, through conversation, and therefore language becomes a "social mode of thinking" (Mercer, 1995, p. 4).

Educational researchers and theorists have shown that talking with peers is valuable to learning (Barnes & Todd, 1995; Mercer, 1995; Cazden, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 1994). "Within the sociocultural perspective, language plays a vital role, enabling learners to gain, process, organize, and evaluate knowledge," writes Maloch (2002, p. 97). Barnes and Todd (1995) suggest "One of the most important ways of

working on understanding is through talk, either in formal education or as part of the learning in everyday life" (p.12). Mercer (1995) explains that language lets us represent our thoughts to ourselves, lets us share with others to make sense of knowledge, and lets us learn from the past.

Regarding formal education, Mercer (1995) writes, "School can offer pupils the chance to involve people in their thoughts—to use conversations to develop their own thoughts" (p. 4). He elaborates:

> The obvious and visible parts of a curriculum are the facts, the information, involved in the teaching and learning of particular subjects. But there is a more subtle quality to educational knowledge…It is that one of the most important goals of education is to help students acquire, recognize and develop specific ways of using language. (1995, p. 79)

Mercer further qualifies "specific ways of using language" in classrooms as "educational discourse" (1995, p.79). He explains that "one important characteristic of educated discourse is that speakers must make their ideas *accountable* [italics original] to specified bodies of knowledge and do so by following 'ground rules' which are different from those of most casual, everyday conversations" (1995, p. 82). After his review of the research and his own studies of talk sequences recorded in classrooms, Mercer (1995) writes, "talk between learners has been shown to be valuable for the construction of knowledge. Joint activity provides opportunities for practicing and developing ways of *reasoning with language* [italics original], and the same kinds of opportunities do not arise in teacher-led discourse" (1995, p.98). In other words, children who never get a chance to practice using content-related ideas

because they are in classrooms in which the teacher does the majority of the talking, or because they are stifled in small group discussions due to peer status effects, may not be accessing the curriculum to the same extent as their peers. Therefore, some students may not be getting the same opportunities to learn as the more vocal students in the class.

Mercer (1995) understands that "education never takes place in a social or cultural vacuum…Learners have social identities which affect how they act, and how other people act, in the classroom" (p.96). In light of the growing diversity of our current student populations and of the increasing demands upon educators to help "all students" make adequate learning gains each year, educators who are cognizant of the influence of peer status on small group dynamics may be better able to structure academic talk to promote productive groups. Yet, even when teachers are able to establish a strong supporting foundation for high level thinking and learning in their classrooms by modeling small group interactions and academic discourse patterns for their students, desirable academic talk and deep learning are not guaranteed.

Mercer (1995) acknowledges the importance of having opportunities to share ideas with equal-status peers. When students are comfortable with their peers in pairs or small groups, talking about the content under study can help reveal their misunderstandings. Mercer gives an example of four sixth grade girls who were working collaboratively to solve a math problem in which they had to make a container out of card stock, and they were trying to find the maximum capacity of the container. One girl, Zoe, who was an excellent math student, was having difficulty with the problem because she had not fully grasped the difference between area and

volume, and at one point in the conversation she was adamant that her ideas were correct. However, through the act of talking out the problem with her groupmates, Zoe discovered the distinction between area and volume. Mercer notes that this example helps demonstrate how some forms of argument and hands-on, practical tasks can be important to learning. Moreover, "some important kinds of learning are more likely to happen when learners are able to talk and work together without a teacher" (p. 13). It is likely that if Zoe were doing only worksheets on area and volume, or if she had been working just with the teacher, she would not have voiced her ideas and her misunderstanding would have gone unchallenged.

In the 1970s, Barnes and Todd (1995) designed a study to "investigate the interplay between cognitive and communicative functions of speech in contexts planned for learning" (p. 8). Barnes and Todd were not looking for evidence of explicit learning outcomes as defined by a standardized test; instead they were looking for evidence of learning defined as "constructing an understanding, not as reflecting and repeating ready-made formulae whose implications [students] have not grasped" (1995, p. 14). Barnes and Todd (1995) explain:

> For most students, talk is the most important way of working on understanding. Talk is flexible: in talk they can try out new ways of thinking and reshape an idea in mid-sentence, respond immediately to the hints and doubts of others, and collaborate in shaping meanings they could not hope to reach alone. (p. 15)

By designing a study to focus solely on student talk during small group collaborative tasks, the authors were hoping to get a better understanding of what kinds of talk adolescents engaged in when working together.

In the study, Barnes and Todd recorded discussions conducted by mixed gender groups of middle class, average ability students in two junior high schools, both on the outskirts of a large city in Great Britain. Barnes and Todd collaborated with teachers from a variety of subject areas to create cooperative learning tasks that coincided with lessons in class to create authentic tasks that would have continuity with the students' regular curriculum. The recordings at one school were made with eight groups of students who had spent a lot of time working together. A total of twenty-nine discussions on nine different subjects were recorded at that school. The second set of recordings was made at a different school in which the students only worked together as a group the one time, for the purpose of the study. Sixteen recordings were made of eight groups at this school over two days.

The authors' analysis of the data revealed both collaborative strategies and cognitive strategies at work in the groups. In the data Barnes and Todd (1995) discovered cognitive strategies such as constructing a question, raising new questions, setting up hypotheses, using evidence to check the validity of an assertion, evaluating, summarizing, and monitoring thinking used by the students. Barnes and Todd concluded that, "the transformative potential of learning in small groups derives from the opportunities which conversations between peers, particularly discussions oriented towards learning, provide for the generation by learners of new ideas, new insights and more complex points of view" (p. 135). Participation in group

discussions seems ever more important to providing opportunities for learning to students. If talk opens up opportunities for "trying out new ideas," or for jointly developing "new insights and more complex points of view," then it is imperative that status effects do not impede small group interactions.

Classroom Discourse—A Significant Shift in Roles

Maloch (2002) discussed the pedagogical choice of student-led discussion groups as a better way to encourage deep thinking about texts. Recognizing the importance of the teacher assuming a leadership role in order to set the focus of the discussion or to lead a discussion of a particularly difficult topic, Maloch cautions, "overt teacher leadership may encourage procedural interaction (i.e. raising hands, waiting to be called on, answering a question) and lead toward a procedural understanding of the literature" (2002, p. 94). Discussion that is more student-centered, Maloch continues, "may encourage students to engage in more problem-solving talk and lead to a more in-depth understanding of the literature" (2002, p. 94). Maloch argues that in student-led discussion groups, students may end up having discussions that are more relevant to them, and may come away with a more meaningful, personal response to the text (2002, p. 94).

In her study, Maloch examines the role of the teacher in helping students develop the discussion skills necessary for content-rich, equitable, high level discussions. Maloch recognizes that making the shift from teacher-led discussions to student-led discussions is a dramatic change in the roles of all participants, and as a result she observed "unfocused, unproductive conversations" early in her study. Maloch reports:

> The students' struggle with a new discussion format comes as no surprise, given their individual and collective histories, which featured a preponderance of teacher-led activities…The interaction norms established in their familiar, teacher-led discussions were no longer appropriate, and students fell back into routines previously established, like raising hands. (p. 100)

However, over the course of Maloch's study, the teacher became the "more sophisticated other" to help students develop their academic discourse skills (Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher "used a variety of intervention techniques to scaffold students' developing understandings of the discussion process. These techniques included direct and indirect elicitations, modeling, highlighting of strategies, and reconstructive recaps" (p. 108). In this way, academic discourse skills and expectations were made clear and visible to students; as they began to internalize these new skills, students in Maloch's study eventually replaced the old routines such as raising hands or "turn-taking" with more sophisticated discussion structures.

Studying Forms of Classroom Discourse

If it is accepted that participation in classroom talk can lead to learning, what kinds of classroom discourse structures are best used to provide learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their academic or social status? In her study of classroom discourse, Cazden (2001) distinguishes between "traditional" and "non-traditional" lessons. Traditional lessons are those in which the teacher does the majority of talking, calling on students one at a time, and often asking questions to which she knows the answer. Cazden (2001) calls this lesson format the "three-part sequence of teacher Initiation, student Response, and teacher Evaluation" (p. 30).

This type of traditional lesson often favors children who are able to sustain focus on one person for extended periods of time, who are familiar with this traditional pattern of talk, and who are confident enough in themselves and their peer status to be willing to raise their hands and volunteer answers in front of larger groups.

Cazden juxtaposes this traditional IRE format with non-traditional lessons in which the dialogue between teacher and students, or within small groups of students, focuses on thinking and the processes of problem-solving, not just on finding a single correct answer. For example, teachers conducting non-traditional lessons might choose to ask several different students for alternative answers, or ask students to "talk to their neighbor" to provide comparisons with supporting evidence, thereby providing an opportunity for more students to "try out new ideas" (Mercer, 1995). Non-traditional lessons of this sort are less likely to penalize students for getting an answer "wrong." Cazden (2001) notes that teachers who have deep content knowledge are often able to find the nugget of logic in a child's response, and then guide the child, usually with the help of classmates' contributions, into developing a logical answer.

The example Cazden (2001) presents in her study involves a child who appears to make a mistake during a whole-class discussion in which the goal was to "state the rule" about a series of numbers. The class gasped when the girl said "eight minus a half is four," but given the timing of the girl's statement in the context of the larger class discussion, the teacher believed that the student "might be expressing a beginning understanding that 'a number could be both a *quantity* (a half) and an *operator on quantities* (one half of the amount you have)…an understanding on the

boundary between arithmetic and algebra" (2001, p. 53). Instead of simply evaluating the child's response as "wrong," the teacher's deep content knowledge allowed her to identify the nugget of logic of this child's response and, by involving several other students in the discussion, the teacher eventually led both the student and the class to a final, clear answer.

Traditional lessons with the IRE sequence of talk have been used in classrooms for so long that the IRE pattern has become the "natural" or "default" pattern of classroom talk. When teachers make a shift to non-traditional lessons, they change the sequence and patterns of talk. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Maloch (2002) noted the difficulties of this "shift." Cazden (2001) suggests that it is important to instruct children on the expected patterns of talk for "academic language—the expectations and norms for language use" in classrooms, and she acknowledges that when academic language is modeled for students they begin to "appropriate the academic terms" in their own discussions with peers (p. 172).

Mercer (1995) uses the term "educated discourse" to describe the kind of talk Cazden refers to as happening during non-traditional lessons. Mercer writes that the goal of education is to "get students to develop new ways of using language to think and communicate, 'ways with words' which will enable them to become active members of wider communities of *educated discourse*" [italics original] (p. 80). Sometimes, Mercer notes, the familiar sequence of talk known as IRE can help teachers scaffold academic talk for students. But, he writes, "Learners can only develop confidence in using new discourses by using them" (1995, p. 81). Mercer defines 'discourses' as "forms of language which are generated by the language

practices of a group of people with shared interests and purposes" (p. 81). In his research of talk in classrooms, Mercer discovers examples of teachers who facilitate student discussions and scaffold educated discourse for students by translating some everyday language into academic discourse. Mercer explains:

> Teachers are expected to help their students develop ways of talking, writing and thinking which will enable them to travel on wider intellectual journeys, understanding and being understood by other members of wider communities of educational discourse: but the teachers have to start from where the learners are, to use what they already know, and help them go back and forth across the bridge from 'everyday discourse' into 'educated discourse.' (1995, p. 83)

Through teacher guidance and opportunities to practice new patterns of academic talk, students learn the "ground rules" of educated discourse so that they can become greater participants in educated communities.

Mercer recognizes, however, that "all learners have social identities which effect how they act, and how other people act, in the classroom" (1995, p. 96). He cautions educators to not evaluate group collaboration and interaction on only the outcome of an activity, but to also find a way to assess the process of the discussion and the way in which students used equitable talk to find a solution (1995, p. 96). Mercer refers to an activity in which pairs of children were attempting to build a crane out of Legos as an example of a successful outcome not necessarily being an indicator of a successful educational experience. In this example, one mixed gender pair is "successful" at creating a quality design for their crane, but only because the girl "submitted to her male partner's verbal bossiness and accepted the role of his

assistant, [a role in which] she had little influence in the design, her ideas were not taken seriously, and a lot of the talk consisted of him giving her instructions" (1995, p. 97). Mercer (1995) writes:

> If one reason for encouraging joint activity is so that all students get the opportunity to use language actively to solve problems, and another is to free them from the constraints of teacher-led discourse, it is hardly satisfactory if some students are often still trapped in reactive roles and have to contend with a different form of dominance. (p. 97)

For this reason, a greater understanding of the influence of peer status on small group discussions is imperative. Educators who are explicit and open with students about accountability and expectations for educated discourse may promote more productive and equitable group work in their classrooms, resulting in more learning opportunities for students.

Based on his research and use of transcripts of classroom talk, Mercer (1995) identifies three typical ways of talking and thinking within small group activities in classrooms. The first he calls disputational talk, in which a lot of disagreement and individualized decision-making happens between groups of students. This type of talk is less productive in generating new ideas and is typical of a group in which peer status is having a strong influence.

The second type of talk between students Mercer calls cumulative talk. This is a more productive type of academic discourse in which students add to each other's thoughts, often confirming, repeating, or elaborating on what groupmates say. The end result is newly shaped "common knowledge" (1995, p. 104). Cumulative talk is

produced when a group is functioning equitably, and everyone has a chance to contribute.

The final type of educational discourse, and the type Mercer finds to be most productive to thinking and learning, is called exploratory talk, a term first coined by Douglas Barnes (Barnes & Todd, 1995). Exploratory talk is a type of talk in which "students engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas" (1995, p. 104). Mercer explains the benefits of exploratory talk over the other two types of talk by pointing out that in exploratory talk, "suggestions are offered…these may be challenged or counter-challenged, but challenges are justified and alternative hypotheses are offered" (1995, p. 104). In exploratory talk, Mercer continues, "knowledge is made more publically accountable and reasoning is more visible in the talk" (1995, p. 104). According to Mercer, developing skill with exploratory talk is important for children because it is highly valued in many cultural institutions for its clarity, accountability, acceptance of criticism, and use of well-reasoned ideas (1995, p. 106). It is also one way children make connections between the content under study and the greater world around them.

A final look at types of talk in classrooms comes by examining the work of James Paul Gee (1996; 2004). Long a researcher of sociolinguistics, especially in how it relates to education, Gee defines 'discourse' as two distinct but related things. Rogers (2004) neatly summarizes the difference by explaining that Gee's "little 'd' [discourse] refers to language bits or the grammar of what is said" (p. 5). Big 'D' discourse, however, "refers to the ways of representing, believing, valuing, and participating with the language bits. Big 'D' discourse includes the language bits, but

it also includes the identities and meanings that go along with such ways of speaking," (Rogers, 2004, p. 5). Gee (1996) likens big 'D' discourse with an "identity kit" that is part of how people "perform" identity. For example, when people assume identities such as that of a doctor or a punk rocker, they make choices in the types of discourse they use as a way to perform that identity.

In terms of classroom discourse, there are both little 'd' and big 'D' discourses involved in educational discourse as well. Little 'd' academic discourse involves speaking in grammatically correct "standard English," and is an important part of what teachers model in the classroom. In certain fields such as science, the grammar and structure of sentences is sometimes different than the grammar used in literary discussions. Big 'D' discourse in classrooms involves a complex mix of ways of reasoning with language, such as Mercer's (1995) exploratory talk, as well as value systems, languages of power, and cultural identities. Understanding the differences between Gee's big and little 'd' discourses may be helpful when classroom talk is analyzed for its form and function in relation to learning, and may prove especially useful to educators who are interested in better understanding how power, agency, identity, and status are negotiated and revealed through the language and talk of the classroom.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored a theory of learning that developed from a theory based on individual cognition into a broader understanding of learning as a socially mediated act. A social theory of learning acknowledges the importance of social interaction, "a more capable other" (Vygotsky, 1978), and overall cultural influences

in the process of forming new ideas and understandings. Lave and Wenger (1994) suggest that learning can be defined as greater participation in communities of practice. In classrooms, also a type of community of practice, students using academic discourse when joining in small group discussions may be one example of when increased participation is evidence of learning. Students engaged in exploratory talk (Mercer, 1995), for example, may be trying out new ideas, challenging each other's hypotheses, providing supporting evidence, and jointly building knowledge.

A critical sociocultural theory of learning, however, may provide educators with a better understanding of the complex web of influences affecting student learning in the classroom. By "critical" here I mean an analysis of the choices educators make related to issues of status, identity, and power in classrooms when designing learning opportunities for students. As Mercer (1995) shows, children can be explicitly taught how to work collaboratively and how to participate in content-rich academic discussions. Yet, factors such as a child's cultural capital, socioeconomic background, familiarity with the discourses of school, culturally mediated perceptions of gender or ethnicity, and high or low academic or social status may all have impacts on his or her opportunities to learn (Cohen & Lotan, 1997). An examination of the structural and social supports teachers provide students, combined with in-depth analyses of small group conversations, may provide educators with additional perspectives on how best to promote productive cooperative group learning activities and opportunities to learn for all students in today's classrooms.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

I collected data for this qualitative study over the course of one school year in my sixth grade classroom. My data collection procedures were approved by Rhode Island College's Institutional Review Board and included an informed consent procedure. Data collection procedures and methods of analysis are detailed in this chapter. The rationale for a qualitative, teacher-researcher approach is discussed.

A Qualitative Study

Theoretical Perspective

I chose to use a qualitative research approach for this study because I was exploring social practices taking place in the natural setting of my classroom. Qualitative research is "largely an investigative process where the researcher gradually makes sense of a social phenomenon by contrasting, comparing, replicating, cataloguing and classifying the object of study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 198). The theoretical framework for this study was developed from a social constructivist perspective in which researchers believe that knowledge is socially constructed and meaning is "typically forged in discussions or interactions with other people" (Cresswell, 2003, p. 8). The qualitative design of this study was also informed by critical theory, a research perspective that "is critical of social organization that privileges some at the expense of others" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.22), and critical sociocultural theory, which includes "more emphasis on issues of power, historicity, and identity" in examining children's opportunities to learn in American classrooms

(Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. 117). My interest in possible peer status effects on students' opportunities to learn during small group discussions made the qualitative research paradigm the logical choice for this study.

Qualitative research methods in education have roots in anthropology and sociology, and can be traced back to the Great Depression when the government hired scholars to document the difficulties faced by American citizens, including displaced school children (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Cresswell, 2007). In the 1940s, sociologists used qualitative methods to examine differences in power relations between genders, and in the 1960s, educational researchers used ethnographic methods to document schooling from the perspectives of different groups of children (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative research has become widely used in education research studies such as this one because it allows researchers to study the culture of schools and classrooms, including social interactions and issues of power and identity (Cresswell, 2007; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Lewis, 2001; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007).

A Naturalistic, Ethnographic Framework

This study was built on a naturalistic, ethnographic framework and took place in the natural setting of a middle school classroom. Qualitative researchers are concerned with context because they "assume that human behavior is significantly influenced by the setting in which it occurs, and whenever possible, they go to that location" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 5). In this study of students working in small groups, I used ethnographic tools of inquiry such as field notes and observations (Cresswell, 2007) to develop an understanding of the culture and social interactions of middle level students during unstructured times and structured class and group

discussions. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) write, "the attempt to describe culture or aspects of culture is called *ethnography* [italics original]" and it relies on a researcher's "thick description" of the events and social interactions of a specific cultural context over time (p. 30). The qualitative, ethnographic tools I employed over the course of a school year allowed me to develop a holistic picture of the cultures of the two class groups participating in the study and the social interactions of my students. By collecting comprehensive data about team and classroom routines, student interactions in large and small groups, teacher actions and interactions with students, and students' academic and social lives, I was able to create a detailed representation of the cultures of the P6 and P7 class groups and the Spartans team as a whole. Having a holistic understanding of the cultures of the team, its two class groups, and its forty-eight individual students provided me with important contextual information to inform my interpretations of student actions, interactions and discourses during small group discussions.

Although this study was designed around the frame of naturalistic, ethnographic research, my research goals led me to choose a teacher-researcher stance which moved this study into the realm of applied research, a type of research "which seek[s] findings that can be used to directly make practical decisions about, or improvements in, programs and practices to bring about change" (Bogden & Biklen, 2007, p. 219). With my ever-present goal of ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students during small group activities, the recursive nature of this study allowed me to make changes in my instructional pace and methods based on the data I was collecting during observations of small group interactions.

The Role of Researcher: A Teacher-Researcher Approach

As a 6th grade middle school teacher who wanted to conduct research in my own classroom, I chose a teacher-as-researcher stance for this study. The teacher-as-researcher stance provided me with the opportunity to systematically study the relationship between my instructional methodology and student learning. Taking an "insider's perspective," which Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1994) define as a "perspective that makes visible the ways that students and teachers together construct knowledge and curriculum" (p. 43), allowed me access to both the teacher's instructional decisions and the social and academic dynamics occurring during small group activities in my classroom. As Burton and Seidl (2005) suggest, traditional forms of research studies that emphasize quantitative measures, experimental designs, and the researcher as an objective outsider "fail to make visible the rich complexity of classroom life as children and adults experience it" (p. 195). Therefore, instead of using a traditional positivistic design, I felt the best method for discovering the relationship between my instructional methodology and the function of cooperative learning groups in my classroom was through the lens of a teacher-researcher.

An educator for over fifteen years, I had questions about what impact, if any, my instruction in academic discourse and discussion skills was having on the way small groups function in my classroom and the types of student learning that was taking place. Burton and Seidl (2005) write, "Theorizing, when defined as the articulation and critical examination of directly experienced phenomena leading to increased understanding, is at the very center of doing research as a classroom teacher" (p. 198). I had a theory that the mini-lessons I implemented to teach

academic discourse skills might be fostering greater equity and high-level discussions in small groups. But now I wanted to, as Burton and Seidl (2005) explain, "illuminate [my] pedagogical acts" and "attempt to make visible the knowledge that teachers often implicitly employ" (p. 198) in order to discover if the focused mini-lessons I had created were indeed improving the quality of small group discussions and student learning in my classroom.

"When teachers systematize a way to consider the effects of their teaching on student learning, they engage in a process of action and reflection," write Burton and Seidl (2005, p. 199). It is this relationship between my actions as a teacher and the student-learning outcomes apparent in my classroom that I examine in this study. Specifically, there were six questions I used to guide this study:

- What specifically do I do to develop a positive classroom climate in which all students can feel welcome to participate?
- What instructional methodologies do I employ to improve discussion skills and opportunities for learning in small groups?
- In what ways do the mini-lessons I designed to teach academic discussion skills have an impact on the dynamics of peer status and student learning opportunities within small groups?
- In what ways, if any, are small group discussions improving in terms of equity of participation and development of high-level discourse over time?
- What are the impacts, if any, of my pedagogical decisions? In other words, how are these decisions affecting student learning, and what

changes could I make to foster increased participation for students who seem to be struggling?

Part of the recursive process of reflective practice is asking questions about what is happening in the classroom, developing a systematic way to collect data related to those questions, and then using the data to make informed decisions. This study attempts to capture that recursive process in my classroom over the course of one school year.

"Teachers, because of their position in the classroom, can offer special insights into the knowledge-production process that those studying someone else's practice are unable to provide," write Zeichner and Noffke (2001, p. 299). As the teacher, I know how much practice my students have had with small group settings and specific academic discourse procedures. Because of this "insider knowledge" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1994; Burton and Seidl, 2005), I was able to isolate specific participant actions and discourse patterns in small groups, and I was able to tease out the specific influence of peer status on small groups. For example, having worked with these students for a full school year, I assessed their abilities to use group skills in the fall, and I ensured that the participants in the study had similar instruction and practice with cooperative learning and academic talk over the course of the school year. In addition, I had an insider's understanding of my students' personalities, inter-relationships, learning styles, and learning challenges, and was therefore better able than an outsider to consider the variety of factors that may have been contributing to student actions within small groups.

Take, for example, the case of Hunter, one of the focal students of this study. As Hunter's teacher, I had a holistic understanding of his difficult home life, his high academic abilities, the physical challenges of his nervous tics, the trials of his social life, and nuances of his relationships with other students in his class. Although a participant observer could gather much of the same data on Hunter as I had available to me as his teacher, it is unlikely that an "outsider" would be as well-equipped as I was to interpret Hunter's actions during group discussions. As his teacher, I had an "insider's" relationship with Hunter and all the student participants of this study; I knew them all intimately on a level that comes from daily contact as we shared our lives together over the duration of a school year. As a veteran middle school teacher, I had the additional advantage of having almost fifteen years of experience in working with middle-level students, providing me with a specific understanding of young adolescents' academic and socio-emotional development to further inform my research.

According to Bogden and Biklen (2007), a qualitative researcher guards against challenges to validity by "laboriously collecting and reviewing piles of data. The data must bear the weight of any interpretation, so the researcher must continually confront his or her own opinions and prejudices with the data" (p.37). Regarding concerns about researcher bias, Bogden and Biklen (2007) write, "qualitative researchers guard against their own biases by recording detailed field notes that include reflections on their own subjectivity" (p.38). As a teacher conducting qualitative research in my own classroom, I collected many kinds of data, including detailed field notes each school day. I attempted to meet the high

expectations of "confronting [my] opinions and prejudices with the data" and "including reflections on [my] own subjectivity" by recursively checking my perceptions throughout the data collection and analysis process. One way I checked my perceptions and confronted my opinions was by annotating my field notes with comments or critiques when typing them up each night into my reflective journal.

For example, on November 13th, I collected field notes during a social studies activity in which students were in small groups making 3-dimensional structures to demonstrate their understanding of the geographical concept of a land bridge. Later, when writing up the field notes into my journal, I made several annotations in an attempt to avoid jumping to conclusions about student actions in small groups. I teach two social studies classes each day, one class called P6 and the other class called P7, based on each group's homeroom room number. This excerpt from my field notes refers to the P7 class. As I walked around the room observing the small groups at work on their land bridges, I recorded following data:

11/3 - SS Activity:

3-D models of land bridges - P7

- Chris, Ava, Kayla, and Ethan – Chris and Ava instantly up, tearing through materials - doing all the work. Ethan looking on, helping a bit, following suggestions. Kayla just sitting back and watching - no one invites
- Nick, Kevin, Alyssa, and Grace. – Nick just watching
- All other groups = full part.

Later, when typing up these notes into my journal, I questioned whether Kayla and Nick were actually "just sitting back" or "just watching" and letting the others "do all the work," a highly subjective conclusion. I confronted my perceptions of Kayla and Nick as students who typically do not do their "share of the work." I critiqued my initial observations and commented on my original conclusions. My annotations to the original field notes are shown in bold below:

11/3: Today in SS we were making 3-D models of land bridges.
Some observations from P7:

- Chris, Ava, Kayla, and Ethan sit together. Chris and Ava were immediately up and tearing through the materials doing all the work. Ethan looked on, helping here and there, following their suggestions. Kayla just sat back and watched, and no one invited her to participate. **This concerns me because I know Ava is now quite adept at inviting others. Why was Ava not inviting Kayla to participate? Perhaps she tried, but I missed it? Maybe Kayla wasn't sure what a land bridge is and had no idea what to do or what suggestions to offer?**
- Nick, Kevin, Alyssa, and Grace sit together. Nick just watched and didn't really get involved. **Perhaps he didn't know what they were doing, or wasn't really sure about a land bridge? Maybe he didn't know what to suggest, or just assumed his ideas weren't going to be good ones?**
- All the other groups seemed to participate equally and get along well.
- **I'm wondering if Kayla and Nick didn't have time to think things through before we started building – slow processing speed? – perhaps they just needed time to remember the concept of a land bridge, and maybe needed some rehearsal before having to give**

ideas to a group? I need to work on checking for understanding and providing enough rehearsal time to kids with slow processing speed to help these kids build confidence and "build status" within small groups.

In the annotated version of the field notes, I questioned my original assumptions about Kayla and Nick not wanting to "do the work," and pushed myself to think more objectively about the students as individual learners and the dynamics of the groups they were in. I questioned whether students with higher status were not including or inviting the kids with low status to participate, not because they were purposely ignoring the other kids, but perhaps because Nick and Kayla did not know what to do or suggest, or maybe they were not quick enough with their ideas. This reflection caused me to think of what I might do differently to offer these students time for "rehearsal" of their ideas. The next time we did a 3-D model in social studies (a plain vs. a plateau) I had the students draw their ideas on warm-up paper before giving the groups the materials. I checked in with students like Nick and Kayla to provide them instant feedback regarding their warm-up ideas, thereby hopefully increasing their confidence in their ideas such that they might be more likely to share them with their groups. I was pleased with the result; I observed both Nick and Kayla actively engaged in building the model with their group mates. This manner of constantly questioning my own assumptions by reflecting on my field notes ensured that I would keep an open mind about student participation and the way small groups were functioning in my classroom. Taking action based on my reflections enabled me to continue to refine the way I used cooperative groups in my classroom.

As further rationale for the teacher-researcher approach, Fecho and Allen (2005) write, "Teacher researchers bring unique vantages to research centered on social justice issues" (p. 214). Fecho and Allen (2005) go on to explain that teachers help create a shared history with their students, and that the teacher is both participant and observer. Burton and Seidl (2005) further explain:

> As observer-as-participant studies in education, [teacher-researcher studies] hold the potential for generating insider knowledge useful to educators in a manner that does not disrupt the classroom nor reduce the complexity of the teaching and learning ecology…Such research offers practicing classroom teachers rich information for improving their own teaching as well as provides valuable theoretical and practical knowledge to the educational community in general. (p. 206)

By choosing teacher-research as the methodology for this study, I gathered information to improve my instructional decisions. This information may also provide practical knowledge to other middle school teachers who are concerned with creating opportunities to learn amidst the sometimes turbulent social dynamics of young adolescents.

Zeichner and Noffke (2001) conducted a brief review of the history and evolution of practitioner research in the United States and Britain for the 4th edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. They write, "We will support the view of practitioner research as a legitimate form of educational inquiry that should be evaluated with criteria that overlap with, but that are somewhat different from, those used to assess the trustworthiness of academic educational research" (2001, p. 299).

By "academic educational research" the authors are referring to trained researchers who come in from outside the classroom. In other words, Zeichner and Noffke are suggesting that, if done with care and rigor, teacher research may be an important tool to help educators increase their understanding of the relationship between classroom practices and students' learning experiences. For this study, I needed a research stance that would value the "emic, or insider form of knowledge" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1994) of the teacher, while also allowing me to apply the tools of naturalistic research paradigms, tools such as field notes, reflective journals, and audio/video recordings. I chose to use a teacher-researcher stance because it met both of these requirements.

Informed Consent

One of the concerns of the teacher researcher approach is that the children in the teacher-researcher's classroom may somehow feel obliged to participate in the researcher's study. It was therefore important to design a study that would:

1) Assure that no student would be treated differently, have a different educational experience than would be otherwise expected, or have a different relationship with the teacher than that of his/her peers;

2) Allow participants to feel comfortable dropping out of the study at any time without feeling that they would somehow be penalized by me in the form of grades or by being treated differently by me as a result of dropping out.

With the guidance of Rhode Island College's Institutional Review Board, I developed an informed consent document that explained the purpose and procedure of the study for parents/guardians to sign, and an assent document for my sixth grade participants

to sign. These documents explained that participation in the study was voluntary and optional, and that all children in my classroom would be involved in identical learning experiences regardless of their decision to participate. The informed consent documents explained that the only difference would be that student participants working in small groups would sometimes be audio or video recorded while working together in their groups. The document stated that the students working in the groups being recorded would be involved in identical activities as those students working in groups not being recorded. The informed consent document and assent document can be seen in Appendix A.

In addition to assuring parents and students that participants would be getting the same educational experiences as non-participating students, the consent document also explained that any participant would be allowed to drop out of the study at any time, and that the student's grades and/or relationship with the teacher would be in no way affected by that decision. Students and parents were assured that the College review board and my major professor were monitoring the research study, and if parents had concerns at any time they could contact Rhode Island College and my major professor. Along with oversight by the College, the principal of my school had reviewed the design of this study and had given his assent to the study being conducted by me in my classroom. Parents were made aware that they could contact the school's principal should there be any concerns.

As requested by the College review board, I was careful to avoid contacting the parents myself in regards to this study. I distributed the consent documents to my students to take home in envelopes addressed to their parents. I asked my students to

be sure to give the envelopes to their parents. Giving students paperwork to take home to their parents is a regular means of communicating with parents in our school district, so I felt confident that most students would give the envelopes to their parents. By the end of November, 100% of the 48 students in my two classes had returned the informed consent documents by the date requested, and all parents had given permission for their child or children to participate in the study. Therefore, 100% of the population available for this study was eligible to participate.

Methods of Data Collection

Data were collected from November to June of one school year. Data included researcher's field notes and reflective journal, teacher lesson plans, teacher observation notes of small group discussions, copies of student work, student sociograms (peer status rankings), and audio and video-recordings of small group discussions.

Field Notes, Reflective Journaling, and Teacher Observation Notes

Using an ethnographic lens, each school day I collected field notes that I later expanded into an on-going, reflective journal. My field notes included informal observations I made in my classroom of students working in small groups, notes about student incidents that happened during unstructured time or outside of class, and conversations regarding students that took place between me and my teammate or at a team meeting. During the school day I carried a clipboard around during all classes and structured and unstructured team activities, lunch duties, and field trips. On the clipboard I jotted bulleted notes regarding student interactions, small group dynamics during group activities, and other observational data regarding students'

peer status, academic ability, or social interactions. I collected detailed descriptions of my classroom set-up and mapped out the ways students organized themselves when working together in small groups. I collected observations of how students in each class group organized themselves during unstructured times throughout the school day. I made notes about topics of conversation in student groups during unstructured activities to help me better understand the interests and lives of students outside of school. I included notes about who acted as student leaders, and which students appeared on the periphery of social groups. In an attempt to compensate for, or guard against potential teacher-researcher bias, I collected information about all forty-eight students on the Spartans team, using field notes and the Teacher Sociometric Device described later in this chapter.

Most often these field notes were written down during class activities, but other times they were recorded after a class, during a planning period, or at the end of the school day. The nature of the teacher-researcher approach created a tension between my role as the teacher doing her "job" and my role as the researcher fulfilling the research study as designed. In the end, the role of teacher always won, and I would put aside data collection during classes as needed. I learned to be flexible and if I did not have time to collect field notes during a particular event, I would at least make a brief comment on a sticky note to remind me of the moment or event to write up later. I was careful to set aside time at the end of every school day to complete my field notes while observations were fresh in my mind.

Later at night and on weekends, I expanded my field notes into a reflective journal. In my reflective journal I kept track of information about individual student

backgrounds and observed behaviors, interactions observed between children during unstructured events, and other observations related to classroom dynamics. Also included in this journal were my reflections about the set of mini-lessons I designed to foster small group academic discussions in my classroom. As I implemented each mini-lesson over the course of the school year, and observed subsequent student discussions, I made notes about what appeared to have worked well with the lesson, whether students were making progress with a particular skill or needed more practice with a skill, and I reflected upon possible changes I could make to improve the mini-lesson design or the design of the next mini-lesson in the year-long discussion skills curriculum. I made notes for how I would adapt the next mini-lesson to meet the current skill level of my students. This reflective journal served as a place where I incorporated my collected field notes about classroom dynamics together with my notes about students' progress with discussion skills. I used this combined information to plan and sometimes re-design my next lesson and to create new groups for the next group activity.

I collected detailed teacher observation notes during small group activities and discussions. These teacher observation notes were different than general field notes in that they were designed to capture the specific dynamics and discussion skills of a small group discussion, and they were not used to collect data during other classroom activities. The teacher observation notes were collected by using a "teacher observation device" modified from the one created by Cohen and Lotan (1997). The chart was designed to collect information quickly, during the fast-paced flow of group discussion. I created codes for each of the skills the students had been practicing

during discussion skill mini-lessons. Early in the year I used just a few codes, such as "D" for "offers an idea during discussion" and "I" for "invites someone to participate," since those were the first two discussion behaviors we had discussed and practiced in the fall. Later, as students added discussion skills to their repertoire, I added new codes to the observation instrument. An example of the teacher observation device I used is shown in Table 2 and is a reproduction of the original observation chart (filled in by hand) to make it easier to read. The table reproduced in Table 2 depicts data collected during a small group discussion taking place in February when students had been practicing discussion skills for several months; therefore, I was using many different codes on this chart to collect data representing a variety of group interactions.

I was open with students regarding the purpose of my clipboard during group activities. I told them that I was observing their group discussions and taking notes in order to provide immediate feedback about what they were doing well. Students also knew that I was there, sitting in with the groups, to help them with skills when I observed the group struggling. At the end of each small group activity, I highlighted for the whole class examples of high-level discussion skills I had observed as I was sitting with that day's group. This served to both reinforce the growth in skills observed in the small group, but also to make public specific examples of skills that were valued in academic discourse. Designed to quickly collect detailed discussion data, the teacher observation instrument served not only as a data collection device for this study; it also became a valued instructional tool for teaching small group cooperation skills and academic discourse.

As shown in Table 3.1, the Teacher Observation Device allowed me to collect information about specific discussion skills students were using, such as inviting each other to participate, using evidence from the text to support an idea, and keeping the group focused on the task. It also allowed me to capture other interaction and behavioral dynamics, such as Tony's comment in Table 3.1 about hanging "off a cliff" that came at the end of Haani's and Joshua's comments about the chapter being a "cliffhanger." Tony's comment and overall quality of participation indicated to me that he needed more individual instruction in group skills; for example, is this discussion Tony did not demonstrate skill with using evidence from the text to support an idea, and did not make reasoned, supported comments or personal connections. He was often playing with objects and seemingly off-task part of the time. Later in the year, the data show that Tony develops his small group discussion abilities, including the ability to use text evidence to support ideas and to better control his off-task/distracting behaviors.

The teacher observation device enabled me to collect data related to student facilitation skills, targeted academic discourse skills, and other group dynamics. The data from these teacher observation charts provided me with instant feedback, a type of formative assessment regarding the growth of my students' individual and collective abilities with discussion skills. I used the data from these charts as food for reflection, helping to guide my next lesson plan.

Audio and Video Recordings of Small Group Discussions

As part of the middle school schedule, I teach social studies and English language arts to two groups of students each day, the P7 class group and the P6 class

Table 3.1: The Teacher Observation Device

Collaborative Discussion Groups Teacher Observation Chart		**Date:** 2/12 (Ava's Tuck Group) **Observer's Initials:** LAC	
Facilitating Codes: H = helps someone I = invites to participate MT = moves task along T = Keeps time/group on task		**Participating Codes**: D = offers idea during discussion ET = gives example from text SF = steals floor/a blatant interruption ? = asks a clarifying question CT = makes personal connection to text	
Student Name/Role	**Facilitating Behaviors**	**Participating Behaviors**	**Off-Task Behaviors or Other Notes**
Ava (Facilitator)	I, I, MT, I, MT, I, MT, I, I, I, I	D, D, D, D, ?, D, ?, D, D, D, SF, D, D, D, SF,	
Madison (Time Keeper)		D, SF (Grace), D, D, D, D, D, D, D	
Haani (Literary Luminary)	I, MT	D, D, D, D, D, D, D, D, D, CT, D, D, ET	"It's a cliff hanger"
Joshua (Recorder)		D, D, D, D, ?, D, D, ET, D, D, D, D, D	"That's what makes it interesting"
Tony	I	D, D, D, D,	• "ow!" (says several times) • *"I want to hang off a cliff" • Playing with objects (pen, rubber band)
Grace	T, MT, H	D, D, D, D, D, D	
Observation Notes: (a general summary)	• Good eye contact • Bodies all leaning in toward table, sitting in circle • Tony's comments off-task or inappropriate—see * above; he's often playing with stuff; says "ow!" several times for no clear reason; attention-getting behaviors, group ignores him		

group. Twenty-seven audio-recordings and four video-recordings were collected over the course of seven months from these two groups of students. Twelve audio-

recordings and two video-recordings were collected of the P7 class group, and fifteen audio-recordings and two video-recordings were collected of the P6 class group, for a total of 31 recordings with an average recording length of 20 minutes. Recordings were collected from December to June, as shown in Table 3.2.

Small groups were chosen for recording based on two criteria: First, I wanted to collect recordings from groups comprised of different groupings of students. For example, I have one girl, Grace, on five different recordings but with a different mix of students each time. Second, there were certain students I had chosen to focus on based on their low or high peer status, their ability to facilitate a group, and/or their

Table 3.2: Collected Audio and Video Recordings

Month	# Recordings P6 Class Group	# Recordings P7 Class Group
December	4	2
January	1	1
February	2	2
*March	0	0
April	7	8
*May	0	0
June	2	2
Total # Audio Recordings	12	15
Total # Video Recordings	2	2

*No recordings were collected in March or May: MCAS state testing interrupted regular classes for a week in each of those months, and the curriculum in those months did not lend itself to small group work.

difficulties interacting successfully with peers. I wanted to be sure to include these focal students in several different recordings. Finally, I was interested in the possible effects of gender on student participation, so I wanted to collect data from both mixed and same-gender groups. Each day of recording, I chose to collect recordings from one or two small groups in each class that best met these criteria. Of the total *n* of 48 students in the study, 47 students were recorded at least one time, 45 were recorded two times, 30 were recorded a third time, 11 were recorded a fourth time, and 2 were recorded five times. Focal students were each recorded at least three times. As a result, the thirty-one recordings represent a wide sample of student participation patterns in various small group contexts, and also represent groups comprised of students with a variety of status rankings.

Methods of Discourse Analysis

Creating the Transcripts

Thirty of the thirty-one recordings were transcribed by me and two hired transcriptionists according to methods described in Cameron's (2001) *Working with Spoken Discourse*, and Powers' (2005) *Transcription Techniques for the Spoken Word*. Powers (2005) suggests giving transcribers clear guidelines for transcribing talk. Taking Powers' advice to keep instructions simple, I asked the hired transcriptionists to organize the discussions into turns by speaker, to include all words to the best of their ability, and to not include any punctuation unless the speaker had uttered an obvious question or exclamation. A "turn," as defined by Cameron (2001), is a section of conversation in progress that "belongs to a single speaker," and that usually has "one speaker speak[ing] at a time" (p. 89). Sometimes in these transcripts

a student spoke only to give an agreement, such as "yeah," but that was still counted as a turn for the purpose of this analysis. Sometimes students engaged in overlapping speech, but these moments, too, were each counted as a turn for each of the students talking.

Although it is sometimes important to document speech exactly as spoken (phonetically), Cameron (2001) writes, "there is rarely any need for such precise and detailed phonetic information in the context of doing discourse analysis" (p. 41). Since I was working with a relatively culturally homogeneous population of children who all spoke English as their primary language, I chose to have my transcriptionists use conventional spelling as much as possible. Had there been children in my classes with diverse dialects, especially if those were dialects associated with low status, it would have made sense to capture their words as they sounded when spoken, but it was not necessary to do so in this case.

At the end of the school year when I had finished collecting and transcribing the audio and video recordings, I began a series of systematic discourse analyses on all thirty-one transcripts. First, using an approach described by Cameron (2001), I listened to each recording in order to fine-tune the transcripts by breaking down student "turns" into "utterances." Utterances are defined here as chunks of speech in which each line usually contains one clause, or as Cameron (2001) explains, "a stretch of talk that contains a subject and finite verb," (p. 44). Utterances can also be related to a shift in purpose or topic. For example, if a student begins her turn by agreeing with the previous speaker, "yeah" and then shifts to the next task, "now we have to…" then I considered that student's turn to have two utterances. Although the

first utterance was not a complete unit of thought as defined by a clause, it was, however, a complete unit of thought in terms of its meaning and function in the interaction, and there was a clear and obvious shift in the purpose of the student's thinking with her second utterance.

Take, for example, the excerpt from Dylan's Tuck Group in Table 3.3. In this short excerpt, the group is discussing the book Tuck Everlasting, by Natalie Babbitt. Rachel has just asked the group what they think the character known as the "man in the yellow suit" has to do with the story. In turn 31, Rachel has a three utterance turn that begins with an agreement, "yeah," but then shifts in purpose to a new topic. In turn 32, Dylan also has a three utterance turn beginning by agreeing with or acknowledging his group mates' comments, and then shifting to a new topic, in this case informing the group that his question was similar to Rachel's.

Table 3.3: Excerpt 1 from Dylan's Tuck Group

Turn	**Student**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
27	Rachel	1	Um, what do you think he has to do with it?
28	Will	1	I think he's kinda, he's kinda like one of those /mysterious/ creatures
29	Rachel	1	/Yeah/
30	Will	1	That only gives you the stuff at the end of the book
31	Rachel	1	Yeah
		2	I can't really answer these questions
		3	'cause I've seen the movie
32	Dylan	1	Yeah
		2	Um, well that was my question
		3	Uh, my question is what do *you* think the man in the yellow suit is going to do?

Breaking each speaker's turn down into individual utterances was important for my analysis for two reasons. First, utterances could be counted as one way to gauge the length of a turn. Second, individual utterances were often made up of added information during a speaker's turn, and therefore were useful when later analyzing turns for quality of thought. Coding the discussions for high-level thinking is described later in this section.

Next, for each transcript, I organized the turns and utterances into table format, as shown in Table 3.4, an excerpt from a group discussion about an event in the novel *Tuck Everlasting*, by Natalie Babbitt. Along with breaking the turns into utterances, in some cases I added commas to transcribed speech if they helped to capture the cadence and pace of the discussion. I added symbols to the transcripts to

Table 3.4: Excerpt from Joshua's Tuck Group Transcript

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utterance**	**Transcribed Speech** Short pause noted: … Transcriptionist note: (making odd sounds) Interrupted speech: bel- Overlapping speech: /cat/
56	Jonathan	1	-She cracked him on the head /with the/ shotgun
57	Joshua	1	/yeah/
58	Jonathan	1	/on the body, or the head?/
59	Mia	1	/Well, she wounded him/ mortally
60	Joshua	1	/Like totally/
		2	Yeah
		3	Why do, why do you think…
		4	When she did it…
		5	She did it and regretted it?
61	Kevin	1	'Cause she killed a man! (group laughs)

show short and long pauses, interrupted speech, and overlapping speech, as suggested by Powers (2005). These symbols were noted in the key in the top row of each transcript, as shown in Table 3.4. For the video-recordings, I made context maps to show where each participant was sitting in relation to other group members and to the furniture in the room. From the video-recordings I also collected data regarding student actions, eye-contact, and body language during the group discussion.

Measuring Participation

This study explored the relationship between patterns of participation in a small group discussion and the types of learning and thinking that were taking place. It also explored the possible impact of peer status on student participation in small groups. To address these topics of analysis, I needed to measure student participation within groups. Since not all groups were composed of the same number of students, it was important to use a measure of a participation that could be compared with student participation across other group samples, regardless of group size.

To create this comparable measure of participation for each student, called a student's participation rate, I copied each transcript into a Microsoft Office Excel spreadsheet. Using the filtering function of the spreadsheet, I filtered each transcript by the name of each student to show only the turns for each individual student. When filtered by student, the total number of turns for that student was automatically calculated by the spreadsheet and was shown in the tool bar at the bottom of the spreadsheet. In this manner I determined each student's total number of turns in each group transcript.

Next, I divided each student's total number of turns by the total number of turns for all the speakers in the group to get a measure of each child's participation within that group. This measure was a percentage of total turns for each student. For instance, there were five members of Dylan's Tuck Group. As shown in Table 39, Rachel has 146 out of 658 total turns, which means she had a participation rate of 22% of the total group discussion. Ethan, on the other hand, has 77 out of 658 total turns, meaning he only spoke 12% of the time, a participation rate of 12%. As an example, I show the turns and utterances for Dylan's Tuck Group in Table 3.5. A visual representation of each student's participation in the overall group discussion is shown in Figure 3.1.

Table 3.5: Turns and Utterances per student in Dylan's Tuck Group

	Dylan	Emily	Will	Ethan	Rachel	Totals
Total # Turns	140	97	198	77	146	658
% of Total Turns	21%	15%	30%	12%	22%	100%
Total # Utterances	219	110	295	124	222	970
Average # Utterances/Turn	1.57	1.13	1.49	1.6	1.5	-
% of Total Utterances	23%	11%	30%	13%	23%	100%

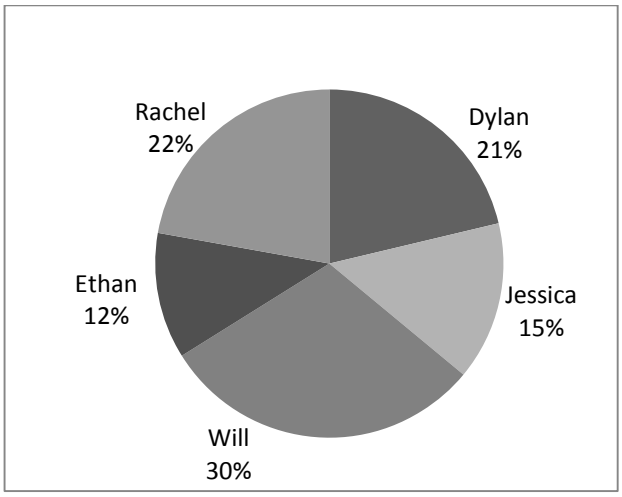

Figure 3.1: Percentage of turns per student in Dylan's Tuck Group

Creating an "Adjusted" Participation Rate

The next step in determining student participation rates was to come up with a measure of participation that could be compared across samples of variable group sizes. In the case of Dylan's Tuck Group, there were five students in the group. Not all groups in the thirty-one recordings collected had five students; most were groups of four, but some groups were composed of five students or even had as many as seven students. Rachel's 22% participation rate in Dylan's Tuck Group, a group of five, would not be the same as a 22% participation rate in a group of four or seven. Therefore, students were given an "adjusted" participation rate for each group sample in order to allow me to compare participation rates across all group samples.

For the purpose of creating this adjusted participation rate, "proportional" participation would be considered equal participation among members of the group, or 1 to 1 participation. For example, if in a three person group, one person participated at a rate of 1.5, one at a rate of 1.0, and the third person participated at a

rate of .5, the conversation would not be considered proportional. A participation rate of 1, therefore, would be considered "proportional" participation for the purpose of measuring a student's rate of participation. A number lower than 1 would indicate that the student did not have a proportional share of the discussion, and a number greater than 1 would indicate that the student had more than his or her proportional share of the discussion.

The formula I used to determine a student's "adjusted" participation rate for each sample was $\frac{total\ \#\ of\ student\ turns}{Group\ Turns/nStudents}$. I created this formula because I needed to determine how the student's actual participation (actual number of turns) compared to the student's proportional number of turns, the expected number of turns for the student if the total number of turns were divided evenly between the members of the group. In other words, if it was a group of four with turns divided proportionally, each student would be expected to have 1/4th of the total turns. If the group had a total of 100 turns, $\frac{1}{4}$ of the turns would be $\frac{100}{4}$ or 25 expected turns. If a student had 25 actual turns, $\frac{25\ actual\ turns}{100/4\ \ expected\ turns}$ = 1, which is a proportional share of the group's turns for a group of four.

For example, in Rachel's case her actual participation rate in Dylan's Tuck Group, a group of 5, was 22% - her total turns (146) divided by the total number of turns in the group (658). Her "adjusted" participation rate, however, would be $\frac{total\ \#\ of\ student\ turns}{Group\ Turns/nStudents} = \frac{146}{658/5} = \frac{146}{131}$ = 1.11. This means that Rachel was participating at a slightly higher than her "proportional" rate.

Ethan, on the other hand, had an actual participation rate in Dylan's Tuck Group of 12%. When adjusted, Ethan's participation rate was .59, or 59% of what his "proportional" share of the discussion should be. In other words, Ethan was speaking about half as much as he would be if the group's turns were proportional. The adjusted participation rates for Dylan's Tuck Group are shown in Table 3.5b.

It is important to note that I am not suggesting that group discussions are only high quality when students speak for proportionally equal amounts of the time. This formula was created only to have a way to compare student participation rates across group samples when group sizes vary. Although measuring student participation rates in this manner is a type of quantitative analysis, it was important to have an accurate way to portray student participation in this qualitative study in order to assess the influence of power and status on student participation in small groups.

Table 3.5b: Adjusted Participation Rates for Dylan's Tuck Group

	Dylan	Emily	Will	Ethan	Rachel	Totals
Total # Turns	140	97	198	77	146	658
Actual Participation Rate (% of Total Turns)	21%	15%	30%	12%	22%	100%
Adjusted Participation Rate	1.06	.74	1.50	.59	1.11	-

A Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

In this study I was interested in understanding the impact, if any, of peer status on student participation, student learning, and small group success. For this reason, I

went further in my analysis of the transcripts by using methods of critical discourse analysis. I wanted to explore not just language in use by students, but the possible power relationships at work in small groups in a middle school classroom. I chose to use critical discourse analysis as one method of analysis in this study because, as Rogers (2004) states, "the term *critical* in CDA is often associated with power relations" (p. 3). Rogers explains:

> [There are] three issues that we believe are important for CDA in educational research. The first is attention to the relationship between language form and language function. The second is attention to the relationship between discourse and contexts. The third is attention to what insights CDA provides us about learning. (2004, p.8)

Framed under the umbrella of sociocultural theory, a critical discourse analysis approach to analyzing the data allowed me to explore the relationships between power, language, and learning as they converged within the small group contexts set up in my middle school classroom.

I modeled my critical discourse analysis methods after the work of Fairclough (2003, 2004) and Gee (2004) because they both have conducted research on social issues related to language and power. Using Fairclough's (2003, 2004) methods of textual analysis, I analyzed the transcripts for the genre, discourse, and style of language used by my students. Specifically, I addressed the following main topics as set out by Fairclough (2003) to guide my own analysis:

Social events:

- What social event, and what chain of social events, is the text part of?

- What social practice or network of social practices can the events be referred to, be seen as framed within?
- What elements of represented social events are included or excluded?

Genre:

- Is the text situated within a genre chain or part of a mix of genres?
- What genres does the text draw upon, and what are their characteristics in terms of activity and social relations?

Exchanges, speech functions and grammatical mood:

- What are the predominant types of exchange (activity exchange, or knowledge exchange) and speech functions (statement, question, demand, offer, invitation)?
- What types of statement are there (statements of fact, predictions, hypothetical, evaluations)?
- What is the predominant grammatical mood (declarative, interrogative, imperative)?

Discourses:

- What discourses are drawn upon in the text, and how are they textured together? Is there a significant mixing of discourses?
- What are the features that characterize the discourses?

Styles:

- What styles are drawn upon in the text, and how are they textured together? Is there a significant mixing of styles?

- What are the features that characterize the styles that are drawn upon (body language, pronunciation, vocabulary, metaphor, modality, or evaluation)?
- How are social actors represented?

I followed my use Fairclough's discourse analysis methods with Gee's (2004) approach, in which I looked at my students' use of language to create socially situated identities and to examine their ability to enact academic "Discourse" with a capital D. Different from little 'd' discourse which is the bits and pieces of language or grammar relating to what was said (Rogers, 2004), big "D" discourses are "distinctive ways people talk, read, write, think, believe, value, act, and interact with things and other people to get recognized (and recognize themselves) as a distinctive group or distinctive kinds of people" (Gee, 2004, p. 39). Specifically, I looked for moments in the transcripts where students "recognized themselves" as "academics" and explored the relationship between my students' situated identities and their participation patterns in group discussions.

Methods of Measuring the Quality of Discussions

My research interest went beyond just ensuring equity of learning opportunities for my students; I also wanted to evaluate the quality of thinking and learning that might be taking place during group discussions. To do this, I used Mercer's process of identifying the three types of talking and thinking as the next method of analysis of the transcripts collected during this study. In order to gauge the quality of the thinking and learning taking place during student discussions, Neil Mercer (1995, 2008) breaks small group classroom discourse into three categories of

talk: disputational talk, cumulative talk and exploratory talk. Mercer (1995) defines disputational talk as "characterized by disagreement and individualized decision making" (p. 104). I also see it as distracted or off-task talk; the type of talk that can disable a group. Cumulative talk refers to discourse in which "speakers build positively but uncritically on what the other has said" (p. 104). And finally, Mercer defines "exploratory talk" as group talk in which "partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas" (p. 104). According to Mercer, Douglas Barnes first coined the term 'exploratory talk' in the late 1970s.

When examining group discourse, Mercer breaks down his three types of talk into three levels of analysis, a method I followed for this study. The first level of analysis is at the linguistic level of speech acts. Although the three types of talk naturally overlap during a small group conversation, there are speech acts that act as cues to the types of talk taking place. For example, as Mercer (2008) explains, when students use a lot of repetitions and elaborations, they are most likely engaged in cumulative talk. Disputational talk, on the other hand, is "dominated by assertions and counter assertions" (Mercer, 1995, p. 105). There are examples throughout the transcripts of moments during group conversations when students are arguing their own point of view, or when students are arguing with other students about their behavior. As Mercer describes, exploratory talk combines a little bit of both disputational talk and cumulative talk, but exploratory talk involves requests for clarification, critical disagreements, and a series of linked clauses indicating elaboration of an idea (1995 p. 105; 2008, p. 9). Using speech acts such as these set

out by Mercer as cues, I coded the transcripts for disputational talk, cumulative talk, and exploratory talk.

A Fourth Type of Talk

As I coded the transcripts for Mercer's three types of talk, I discovered that there was a significant amount of student talk during literature groups that did not fall into any of Mercer's three categories. These examples of "other" talk were mostly related to organizational or procedural tasks. I therefore created a fourth category that I called organizational talk, a type of talk that I chose to code along with Mercer's three types. Organizational talk was the type of talk that groups did as they were getting settled and trying to figure out what they were doing, as they were shifting tasks within a group session, and as they were cleaning up.

Each transcript was coded by marking each utterance as O for organizational, D for disputational, C for cumulative, and E for exploratory, depending on the type of talk the group or individual was engaged in at that point of the discussion. To illustrate this method of coding, I again show Excerpt 1 from Dylan's Tuck Group in Table 3.6, but this time have included the right hand column I used for coding the different types of talk.

The second level of analysis, according to Mercer, is at the psychological level, an "analysis of talk as thought and action" (1995, p. 104). This second level of analysis informed the coding of the three types of talk as I worked my way through the transcripts. Sometimes if a segment of talk seemed like it was debate, the context of the talk helped me identify whether or not the tone of the talk in that section was competitive, and hence disputational, or whether the tone suggested that the students

were aiming for consensus through critical thinking, and therefore was actually exploratory talk.

Table 3.6: Excerpt 1 from Dylan's Tuck Group with Codes

Turn	**Student**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**	**Code**
27	Rachel	1	Um, what do you think he has to do with it?	E
28	Will	1	I think he's kinda, he's kinda like one of those /mysterious/ creatures	E
29	Rachel	1	/Yeah/	C
30	Will	1	That only gives you the stuff at the end of the book	E
31	Rachel	1	Yeah	C
		2	I can't really answer these questions	D
		3	'cause I've seen the movie	D
32	Dylan	1	Yeah	O
		2	Um, well that was my question	O
		3	Uh, my question is what do *you* think the man in the yellow suit is going to do?	C

As I finished coding the transcripts for these four types of talk, I decided to determine the percentage of group talk that each of these four types of talk amounted to in each transcript. To determine the percentage of total group talk for each type of talk, I used the filter tool on the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to filter by each type of talk. I divided the total number of utterances coded as O, D, C, or E by the total number of group utterances. For example, the percentages of each type of talk used during the conversation in Dylan's Tuck Group are shown in Table 3.7.

Finally, the third level of analysis of these three types of talk is at the cultural level. As Mercer (1995) writes, analysis "inevitably involves some consideration of the nature of 'educated' discourse and the kinds of reasoning that are valued and

Table 3.7: Percentage of Types of Talk in Dylan's Tuck Group

Organizational Talk	Disputational Talk	Cumulative Talk	Exploratory Talk	Total Percent of Group Talk
34%	29%	17%	19%	99%

encouraged in the cultural institutions of formal education" (p. 105). At this level of analysis, Mercer suggests exploratory talk deserves "special attention" because it "embodies certain principles—of accountability, of clarity, of constructive criticism…which are valued highly in many societies" (p. 105). As I examined the transcripts collected for this study, I analyzed each one for these three types of talk, looking carefully for examples of cumulative and exploratory talk. If exploratory talk is the most valued type of educated discourse, I was looking for clues as to what might allow a group to reach that type of high level of talk so that I could better understand how to foster exploratory talk with future groups of students. My discussion and conclusion of these findings are presented in Chapter 7.

Methods of Measuring Peer Status

Peer Status Rankings

One purpose of this study was to better explore the influence of peer status on the way small groups functioned in my middle school classroom. In order to explore peer status effects in the small groups, and to investigate whether my teacher-designed mini-lessons had an impact on limiting peer status effects during small group work, it was necessary to use a reliable means of collecting peer status rankings.

This study employed two methods of rating peer status for data collection, one method based on student ratings of their peers, and another based on teacher ratings of student status. For the first method, I used a sociometric device based on the model developed by Cohen and Lotan (1997b) for their study of peer status effects on heterogeneous groups in urban California schools. The strength of the student generated sociometric device created by Cohen and Lotan is that it allows the researcher to discover the academic and social status rankings for all students in a class based on the students' own perceptions of status.

For this study, I collected these status rankings under the authentic pretext of asking for student input in the creation of small groups. I often ask my students to suggest some of the people in the class with whom they would like to work. This student input helps me make groups that students will enjoy being a part of while also allowing me to control the composition of groups. Using this data collection method did not reveal to the student participants that I was identifying individual peer status rankings.

To collect the peer status rankings, I told students that I would be setting up literature groups and that I wanted to give them some input regarding the students with whom they would be working. I gave each student a complete class list with two parts, as shown in the sample student sociometric device in Figure 3.2. Part 1 of this device, entitled "Friends," instructed students to "circle the names of the students in the class whom you most consider your friends." It also directed students to circle at least two boys' names and at least two girls' names, but also to "circle as many names as you want." Part 2, entitled "Best at Subjects," instructed students to "circle

the names of the students in the class who you think are the best at ELA and social studies" while being sure to "choose people who you most respect for quality work in these subjects." The directions again asked students to "circle at least two boys' names and two girls' names" and to "circle as many names as you want." The "friends" prompt was chosen as a way to identify each student's social status ranking, according to his or her peers. The "best at ELA and social studies" prompt was

Help Mrs. C Form Small Groups!

The purpose of this activity:

- to tell Mrs. C who you like to work with in groups
- to give Mrs. C some options when making high-quality groups

Part 1: Friends

1. Circle the names of the students in class whom you most consider friends
2. You must circle at least **two** boys' names and **two** girls' names
3. You may circle as many names as you want

Chris Sophie Grace Joshua Kevin Will

Alyssa Ben Dylan Madison Joshua Olivia

Part 2: Best at Subjects

1. In this section, tell Mrs. C which students in the class you think are best at ELA and social studies
2. **It does not matter** if the person is your friend or not
3. Circle at least **two** boys' names and at least **two** girls' names
4. Circle as many names as you want
5. Choose people you **most respect for quality of work** in these subjects

Chris Sophie Grace Joshua Kevin Will

Alyssa Ben Dylan Madison Joshua Olivia

Figure 3.2: Sample Student Sociometric Device

created as a way to identify each student's academic status ranking for English Language Arts and social studies classes, according to his or her peers. These prompts were adapted for this context directly from Cohen and Lotan's (1997b) original sociometric device. I was confident that students were honest when completing the device as my own teacher observations of friendship groups provided me with enough data to support the results.

Following the method used by Cohen and Lotan (1997b), I tallied up how many times each child was selected by his or her peers and generated a class sociogram showing the distribution of students' social and academic status rankings. Next, I used Cohen and Lotan's method of dividing the distribution of students' social and academic scores into quintiles. Each child was assigned a quintile score ranging from 1-5 for social status and another quintile score for academic status, with 1 equal to low status and 5 equal to high status, depending on the fifth of the distribution in which lay the number of times that child's name was chosen. For example, students in quintile rank 1 were chosen once or twice by their peers, while students in rank 5 were chosen by their classmates eleven to seventeen times. Table 3.8 demonstrates how the academic status quintile scores were determined for students in P6.

One challenge that may be immediately apparent to the reader is that the tallied scores did not distribute evenly into five neat groups. It was inevitable that the spread of scores would vary from class to class, and that there would be some scores shared by many students, and other scores shared by a few or even just one student. I divided the students into as evenly numbered groups as possible, aiming for 20% of

Table 3.8: P6 Fall Academic Status Quintile Results

P6 Academic Status Quintile Ranks (*IEP)									
1 (Lowest Status)		2		3		4		5 (Highest Status)	
1, 1, 1, 2, 2, 2		3, 3, 3, 3		4, 5, 5, 6		7, 8, 9, 9, 10		11, 11, 11, 16, 17, 17	
Haley	1	*John	3	Jeremy	4	Jasmine	7	Morgan	11
*Rebecca	1	Sara	3	Leah	5	Kimberly	8	Michelle	11
Hunter	1	Sean	3	Jennifer	5	Faith	9	Logan	11
*Lynn	2	Jade	3	Jacob	6	Robert	9	Owen	16
Carlos	2					Paige	10	*Evan	17
Natalia	2							Zoe	17

the students in the class in each status group, as would be defined by the idea of "quintiles." For example, in the P6 class I did not want students with tally scores of 1 to be a group because that would be only three students in a group, and it would therefore cause one of the other groups to have six or seven students in it, which is more than 20% of a class of 25 students. I also did not want to divide up the students who had tally scores of 2 or 11, as in the case of the scores in Table 5, because it was not logical to arbitrarily move students into a higher or lower status group just because they did not all fit neatly into groups of five. Therefore I did the best I could to divide the distribution evenly between the five quintile scores, even if it meant leaving some groups with only four students, a number lower than 20% of the class, and other groups with six students, a quantity over 20% of the class.

Once I had determined each child's social status rank and academic status rank, I was able to assign each student an overall peer status rank in which the academic and social status rankings were combined. To determine this overall measure of status, I again borrowed from the method used by Cohen and Lotan

(1997) in which the two quintile ranks were added together to create a co-status score ranging from 2-10. For example, if Sara had an academic status of 3, and a social status of 1, her co-status score was a 4. Students' co-status scores were again distributed and grouped into five ranks. This student-generated sociometric was completed once in October and again at the beginning of June in order to track any changes in individual peer status rankings over the course of the school year.

The Teacher-Generated Sociometric Device

For the second method of collecting peer status data, I used my own teacher observations of student peer status. I used a method similar to that used by Cynthia Lewis (2001) when she used teacher observations as a primary source of information about peer status in her study of literacy practices in a fifth grade classroom. In her study, Lewis collected information about the social and academic status of each of her five focal students by interviewing the students' teacher, principal, and parents. She also collected data from her own observations of student and peer interactions while she was visiting the school, and she used interviews with the focal students themselves as a further source of information for peer status rank. Using the work of Lewis as a model, I created my own teacher-generated sociometric for each of my students. These data were collected and scored based on the rubric I designed, shown in Table 3.9.

As shown in Table 3.9, the Teacher-Generated Sociometric Rubric, a student's SES rank was determined by free or reduced-fee lunch. If a student had low SES, the SES score was a 1. If a student did not get free or reduced-fee lunch, the SES score was a 2. For academic status, students were given a score from 1-3 based

on whether they were low, middle, or high academic status, as described on the rubric in Table 3.9. Similarly, for social status, students were given a score from 1-3 based on whether the data collected indicated they were low, middle, or high social status, as described on the rubric. The highest overall score a student could receive, also called the "Final Score," was an 8, and the lowest score possible was a 4.

Table 3.9: Teacher-Generated Sociometric Rubric

	1	2	3
SES	• Reduced-fee lunch	• Not Reduced-fee lunch	
Academic Status	• Rarely participates in whole or small group activities • Low Grade Point Avg • Struggles with math • Struggles with reading	• Sometimes participates in whole group or small group activities • Average Grades • Average math skills • Average reading skills	• Frequent participation in whole group and small group activities • High Grade Point Avg • High math skills • High reading skills
Social Status	• Sits alone or with few others at lunch • Chooses to work alone • Sits off to side during "down time" • May not be invited to join groups • Doesn't attempt to join groups, or if does, is rebuffed • Is seen socializing with few other students	• Has a regular lunch group • Works alone or with others • Has a core group of students s/he usually sits with or chooses to work with, if given a choice • Is observed socializing with a core group of students	• Has a regular lunch group (may be a very big group) • Rarely chooses to work alone • Has a large number of students s/he chooses to work with • Most other students seem to want to be part of his/her group • Is observed socializing with a large group of students; appears to be liked by everyone

Once I had used the Teacher-Generated Sociometric Rubric to complete a sociometric chart for each student, I again distributed the scores from each class and divided them into quintiles. The quintile score is noted at the bottom of each student's teacher-generated sociometric chart, as shown on Evan's chart in Table 3.10. The combination of student-generated sociometric data and the teacher-generated sociometric charts allowed for triangulation of data. These data were then

compiled into charts showing status rankings for both classes, for both the fall and spring. Fall and spring data were then compared and changes in status were noted.

Table 3.10: Teacher-Generated Sociometric Chart for Evan

June 2010	Student: Evan K.	Class Group: P6
Scores Based on Rubric	Data Collected from Teacher Observations & Student File	
SES = 2	Address	891 Washington Street
	Free/Reduced Lunch?	No

Academic Status = 3	5th Gr. Teacher's Notes	• IEP/BBST
		• High/Avid reader; will need a challenge
		• High/avg writer; good ideas
		• Talented speaker
		• X-tra talented in Math
		  ○ Advanced 4th Gr MCAS (state test)
		  ○ High basic skills
		  ○ High probl solv
		• Able to advocate for self
		• Classroom w/aide
		• "outstanding in math"
		• "has progressed this year socially (read IEP)

	Grade Point Average	A
	Participation whole group	Moderate
	small group	Moderate
	Reading Preferences	Matt Christopher sports fiction (elementary level series) Non-fiction/science & history
	Struggles?	Social; starting informal conversations Expanding ideas in writing
Social Status = 1	Elementary School	Madison
	Size of Lunch group	Moderate
	Work-Time Choices	Working alone
	"Down-Time" behavior	Sitting alone with binder closed, looking around Drawing
	Friendship group (Fall)	Jeremy, John, Robert, Owen (Leah, Michelle, Morgan,)
	(Spring)	Jeremy, John, Robert (Paige, Rebecca, Haley)
	Hobbies/Teams/Clubs	Baseball, Brain Puzzles (mastered Rubik's Cube)
	Final Score: 6	
	Quintile Score: 3	

Chapter Summary

In summary, the data collection for this study took place over the course of the 2009-2010 school year in my sixth grade classroom. Data collection and informed consent procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Rhode Island College. I chose to use a teacher-researcher approach for this study because it provided access to the "insider's perspective" as described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1994). This approach allowed me to take advantage of the recursive nature of reflective practice. Data collection methods included daily field notes, teacher observations of small group discussions, student work samples, audio and video-recordings, and student and teacher-generated peer status rankings.

I used a variety of data analysis methods during this study. Audio and video-recordings were transcribed by hired transcriptionists and were fine-tuned and finished by me, using formats and symbols suggested by Cameron (2001) and Powers (2005). Once I had formatted the transcripts into Microsoft Excel tables, I determined each student's participation rates and adjusted participation rates for each group discussion. I used Fairclough's (2003, 2004) and Gee's (2004) methods of critical discourse analysis to look at genres, discourses, styles, and situated identities during group talk. I coded the transcripts for Mercer's (1995, 2008) three types of talk, and included a code for a fourth type of talk that I discovered in the transcripts, organizational talk.

Peer status rankings were collected using a sociometric device first developed by Cohen and Lotan (1997b). Students completed sociometric charts in the fall and the spring. Data from these sociometric charts were tallied and distributed into

quintiles, with each student receiving a status rank between 1 and 5, with 1 being the lowest status and 5 the highest status ranking in the class. Teacher-generated sociometric data were also collected, following a method used by Lewis (2001). Multiple data sources such as these permitted triangulation, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of data analysis and the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 4

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Overview

In Chapter 4, I describe the community, school, and classroom context in which this study took place. I examine the town's demographics and the school's philosophy and vision. Through the lens of ethnography, in this chapter I provide the "rich description" needed to capture a holistic picture of the cultures of my team, classroom, and two class groups. Through the lens of a teacher-researcher, I describe my pedagogical actions throughout the year, including the reflective decision-making central to my implementation of my discussion skills curriculum.

Specifically, in this chapter I use Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice as a framework to explore the learning community in my classroom, including the steps I took to structure the classroom climate to promote student participation. By reviewing Cazden's (2001) traditional and non-traditional discourse structures, I describe the body of lessons and activities I designed to teach the social and discussion skills students need to work successfully in literature discussion groups. Finally, I describe Mercer's (1995) three types of talk as one set of criteria to promote high quality student talk during small group discussions.

The Community Context

Demographics

This study took place in a mostly middle to upper class town in Massachusetts located forty-five minutes from Boston. This town has a growing population of just

over 31,000 residents and a median household income of $89,000 according to the U.S. Census Bureau 2005-2009 data. Census Bureau data also show that 94% of the town's population is white, 3.5% of the population is Asian, .9% is Black, and the remaining 1.6% of the population is made up of Latino and other ethnic minorities. Many families in town are wealthy or upper middle class, but the majority of families in town are middle class and working class, with 2.5% of families below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau 2005-2009).

Education

Just over 94% of the adults in town have earned a high-school diploma, and over 47% have earned a Bachelor's Degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009). During the year of this study, 92% of the town's high school students passed the tenth grade English Language Arts Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test, the state standardized test also known as MCAS. Eighty-nine percent of the town's high school students passed the tenth grade Mathematics MCAS test (Mass. DOE, 2011). Passing the 10^{th} grade MCAS tests is a requirement for graduation in Massachusetts.

The School Context

The Building

The first of the new schools built during the town's economic boom decade (the 1990s), Phelps Middle School was a showcase when it opened in 1996. The architecture of the building included features such as a domed rotunda off to one side of the library, the library ceiling designed in the shape of an open book, and four large windows in almost every classroom. Joined to one of the town's elementary schools

built at the same time, Phelps Middle School and Madison Elementary School share a central corridor including the office areas, nurse's office, cafeteria/auditorium, and gym. When it opened, Phelps Middle School was full of up-to-date technology. There were TVs in every classroom hooked up to the teachers' desktop computers, two fully equipped computer labs, six state-of-the-art science labs, and two student computers in every classroom.

Faculty, Staff, and Students

I began teaching at Phelps Middle School in 1998, two years after the school opened. At the time of this study, I had been teaching at PMS for eleven years. PMS employs over thirty teachers, five special educators, six classroom aides, a principal and vice principal, a guidance counselor, a school adjustment counselor, a math curriculum specialist, a reading specialist, and a speech and language pathologist. Due to budget cuts, PMS lost its librarian the year this study began.

There are three similarly sized middle schools in town, each enrolling about 450 students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. Although the demographics are generally comparable between schools and reflect the town's demographics, there are a few differences. For instance, although the town is fairly homogeneous, the neighborhoods served by PMS include the town's two low-income public housing developments, several working class neighborhoods located in the center of town, several middle class neighborhoods within walking distance, and an upper middle class neighborhood of very large houses located right behind the school. The other two middle schools in town serve mostly middle class and working class families, with few of the highest-income or lowest-income families living nearby.

Two elementary schools feed into Phelps Middle School. Both elementary schools serve middle class families, but one of these elementary schools is located near the town's public housing developments and working class neighborhoods in the center of town. The other elementary school is adjoining two of the upper middle class neighborhoods in town. Students coming from these two elementary schools into PMS in sixth grade find themselves trying to forge new friendships with children who, although not necessarily racially diverse, may be coming from a different socio-economic life-style or set of values from their own. This results in distinct class differences within the student population of PMS.

Middle School Philosophy and Organization

When Phelps Middle School was being built, the town was shifting from a junior high model to a middle school model. There are two main differences between the junior high model and the middle school model, a curricular difference and a structural difference (Brown & Knowles, 2007). First, rather than following a high school curriculum model, middle schools design curricula around the needs of eleven to fourteen-year old children, with an understanding of their social, emotional, and moral development. Second, middle schools are organized differently than junior highs. Middle schools have teams of two to five teachers that are responsible for a group of students; teachers on these teams (including special educators) are given common planning time and meet regularly to discuss topics like curriculum integration, team teaching, and ways to better meet the needs of their shared students (Brown & Knowles, 2007).

Following this middle school philosophy, students and teachers at PMS are organized into teams. The seventh and eighth grades have four academic teachers on a team, each specializing in one content area. The sixth grade is organized into smaller teams with only two academic teachers on a team, each teaching two content areas. As one way to help incoming fifth grade students transition smoothly into middle school, sixth grade teams are purposefully kept small, with only 45 – 50 students on a team. These smaller, family-like groups allow the two teachers to get to know each student on the team very well. I am a sixth grade ELA and social studies teacher on a two person team known as the Spartans. The other teacher on the Spartans, Kurt Walker, teaches math and science. At the time of this study, Kurt and I had been teammates for twelve years.

Structure of the School Day

Under this team arrangement, each sixth grade teacher has a group of students for two consecutive class periods each day, a middle school structure also known as double-block scheduling, or "block scheduling" for short. On a typical school day during the year of this study, I saw my homeroom class, "P6" (named after my room number), for an ELA period and then a social studies period during back-to-back periods (a double-block). Later in the day I saw my teammate's homeroom, the class group known as "P7," for ELA and social studies during back-to-back class periods. While one class group was with me, Kurt had the other group for math and science. Each class period averaged fifty-five minutes; the double-blocks allowed us to work with each group of students for almost two hours every day.

The Classroom Context

Organizing the Physical Environment

I organized my classroom furniture so that students were sitting together in small groups of four or five. I used several areas of the room during my lessons, so there was no traditional "front" of the room (see the classroom map in Figure 4.1). I covered the four walls of the classroom with content-related vocabulary. I displayed content-related books on the social studies table, and taped writing, reading, and ancient civilization posters on the walls around the room. I set up my classroom library using wire book holders to display current, age-appropriate popular magazines such as *Girls' Life*, and *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, along with the newest books from the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series by Jeff Kinney and the *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordian. On the walls above my library I hung posters reflecting popular novels-turned-into-movies such as *Twilight* and *Harry Potter*. On the bookshelves below I had collected several hundred popular young adult novels and eye-catching non-fiction books, all color-coded by genre and organized in plastic bins wide enough for the covers of the books to be displayed facing outward for easy access and selection.

The homework board was located above a purple file cabinet under the clock and near the door to the hall. The daily schedule hung next to the homework board. On one wall, a white-board displayed the daily ELA agenda and learning objectives, and we used it for note-taking during ELA classes. Directly opposite, I wrote the social studies agenda and learning goals on the chalk board each day. Two large pull down maps, one of the world and one of the United States, hung above the chalkboard. On the third wall between the closets and the classroom library, I set up

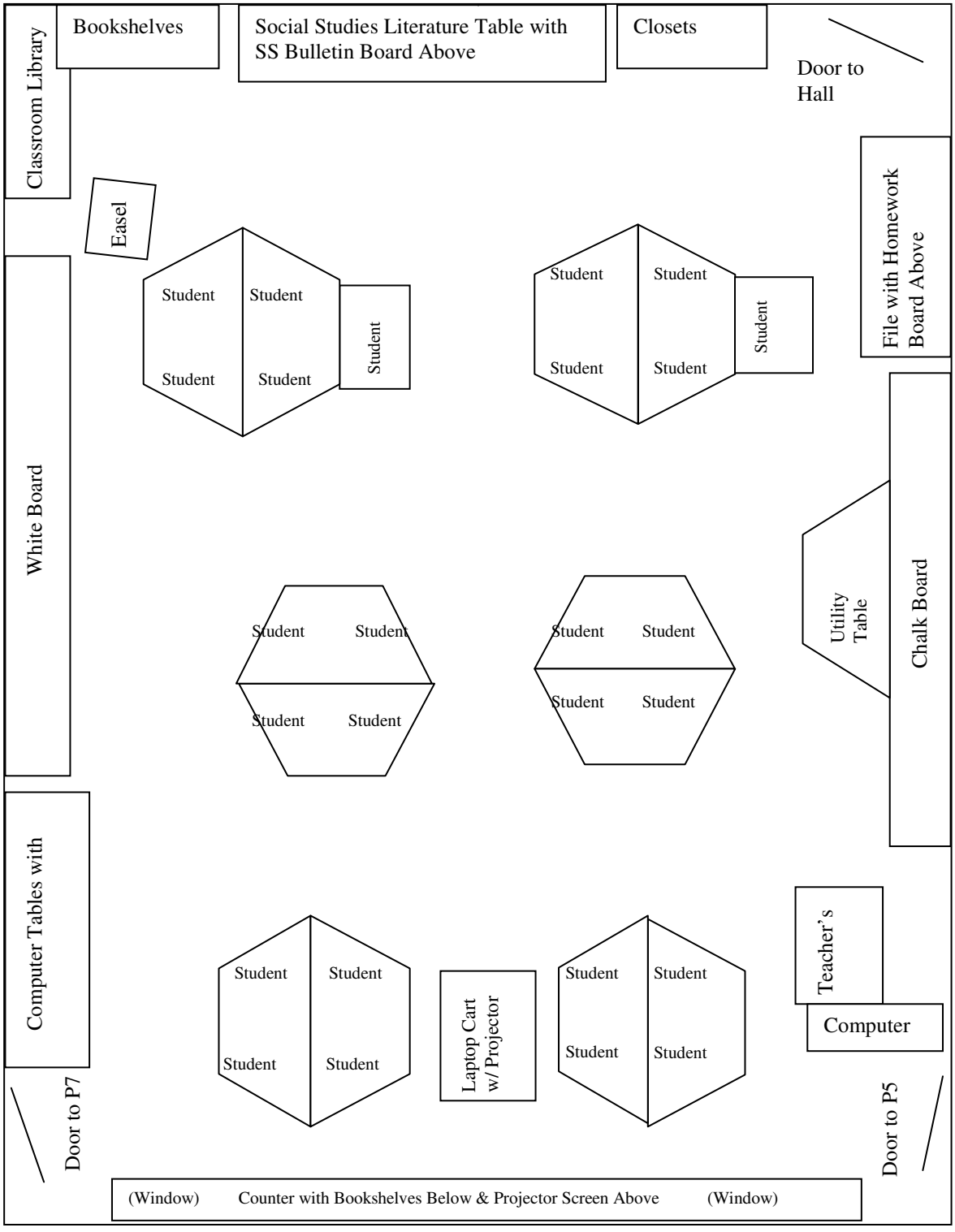

Figure 4.1. Map of My Classroom

the social studies bulletin board to be an interactive learning station. Throughout the school year there was always a map of the current civilization under study that students could label for practice, and related cultural artifacts they could hold and examine.

Technology was a major component of my classroom, with four student computers and a printer lined up along the wall between the white-board and the djoining door to P7. I also had a computer on my desk, but had it set up in a way that allowed for easy student access. A projector screen covered much of the fourth wall in the room. A laptop cart holding a laptop and a data projector was facing the screen. I used the laptop and data projector on a daily basis. The message I attempted to communicate through this classroom arrangement was that the students and the content under study were the focus of each lesson, not the teacher. Together, we would be exploring many topics through project-based research and small group discussion over the course of the school year.

Building a Positive Team and Classroom Culture

As the school year began, my new sixth grade students had to adapt to a new school, several new teachers, and a challenging curriculum. Since students were coming from two elementary schools, they formed new social groups and developed new friendships, sometimes leaving old friends behind. In this social context, I attempted to create a positive classroom culture in which each student would feel welcome and valued by his or her peers.

During the first week of school, however, it was clear to me that there were wide academic and social differences among this group of students. For example, on September 1st, the first day of school, I wrote in my journal:

> Kurt told me at the end of the day that he was both concerned and delighted about his homeroom. Concerned, because so many kids needed help every step of the way through schedules, paperwork, etc. (and us without a classroom aide yet). However, he was also full of smiles at the end of the day because he said other students just "popped up out of their seats and began helping" without even being asked. He said there were four or five kids who made the difference between a success and a disaster of a first day.

From Kurt's description, many of his students were having difficulties following even simple directions while others were finishing tasks quickly. A few weeks later, once again making an observation about students in P7, I wrote:

> Mia and Brenda have a very interesting dynamic during this pyramid project [a social studies culture project]. Mia appears to be doing a lot of the "real" work and thinking, while Brenda appears to be looking up words in the dictionary… Mia has such a haughty academic tone that I think it pushes many of her classmates away, especially students like Brenda who don't seem to hold the role of "successful student" [Brenda has an IEP and struggles in school.]

This and other data collected that first month of school showed the wide differences in academic abilities and social status within our two groups of students, especially in the P7 class group. Establishing an open, safe classroom climate was the first step

towards my goal of providing low status students like Brenda a greater chance to be valued by her peers.

I began the process of fostering a collaborative, safe learning community by helping students create their own classroom constitution. Creating the constitution was important because it became the foundation upon which our classroom culture would be built. Our sixth grade social studies curriculum covers five ancient civilizations, including each culture's government and laws. By launching the first social studies lesson of the year with the question, "Why do societies have rules and laws?" I tied together current and past governments while also establishing an authentic purpose for making the classroom constitution together.

After discussing the purpose of rules and laws, the class came to the conclusion that rules and laws are created to solve problems. Jumping off on this point, I asked my students to brainstorm problems they had experienced in school, including problems with other students and with teachers, in classrooms, on busses, or at recess. I reminded them that they were all "experts" at school since they had been students for six years already; surely there were problems in schools and classrooms that they could identify.

My students generated lists of the problems they saw related to students and teachers. Predictably, some of the "problems" were about things like homework. I acknowledged that homework can be problematical, and gave them several examples of guidelines that we could add to our constitution to help keep homework manageable. I explained that our classroom constitution was not meant to be limited to guiding only student behaviors; teacher behaviors should also be included. It was

important for students to see that in this learning community, the teacher was not the only person in the room with a voice that mattered.

After both classes (P6 and P7) had generated lists of problems experienced at school, we then sorted the problems into categories. We wanted to limit our constitution to five or six guidelines, or "articles." First, we sorted problem behaviors such as name-calling, teasing, and gossiping into a category called "bullying." Behaviors such as "always calling on the same people" and "treating boys differently than girls" we grouped into a category named "teacher behaviors." Once we had sorted all of the problems into categories, we wrote one article for each category. We studied the United States Constitution and modeled our document after its preamble, articles, and Bill of Rights. Students liked the idea of a bill of rights, and we chose to create a classroom bill of rights to accompany the articles of our classroom constitution.

The final draft of our constitution included seven articles and four 'rights.' The first article, or guideline for behavior, was "Kindness and patience are the most valued behaviors in our classroom." Another article read "Bullying, teasing, or gossiping of any kind will not be tolerated." Modeled directly after the nation's Bill of Rights, the first item on our classroom bill of rights read, "All students have the right to learn, regardless of gender, academic or artistic ability, friendship groups, religion, or appearance." Another item on our bill of rights was "All students have the right to be heard." Once the final draft of our constitution was finished and signed by all the Spartans students and teachers, the new Spartans' Classroom Constitution and Bill of Rights was hung on the wall as a reference for the rest of the year (Figure 4.2).

Continuing my focus on promoting a positive classroom learning community, during the third week of September I used our classroom constitution as a springboard for an activity in which we would describe what a "safe, collaborative classroom" looks like. Middle level learners often need behaviors to be explicitly described and modeled (Knowles & Brown, 2007). To begin the activity, I wrote on the white-board "A Safe, Collaborative Classroom." I read each article of our constitution and bill of rights, restating each one as a description of a behavior.

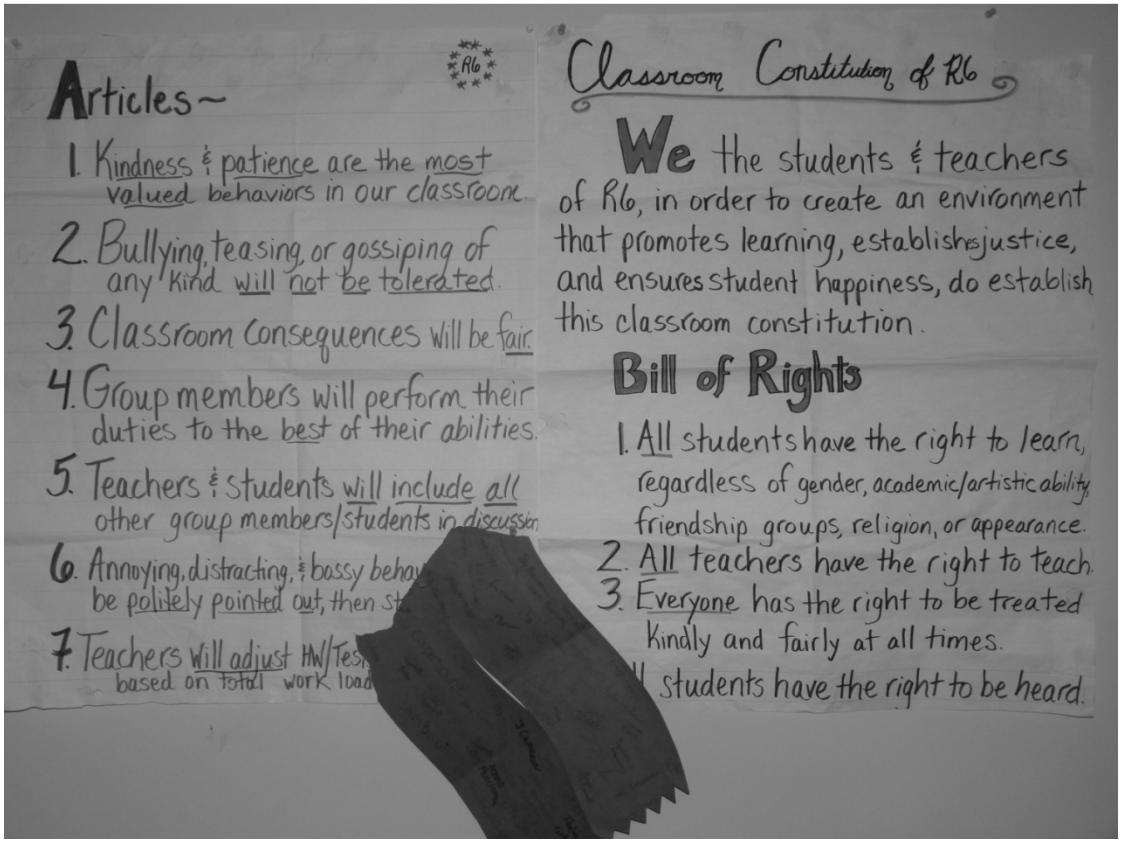

Figure 4.2: Photo of the Spartans' Classroom Constitution

For example, “All students have the right to be heard” turned into the descriptive phrase “we welcome all voices and opinions.” As recorded in my journal, the list read:

A Safe, Collaborative Classroom is:

- a place where we welcome all voices and opinions
- where risk-taking is encouraged and celebrated
- where mistakes are an expected part of the learning process
- where people invite others to participate, regardless of gender or friendship group
- where listening carefully to other people’s ideas is valued and expected
- where excluding behaviors are unacceptable
- where kindness and patience are valued

It is my experience that middle level students need help learning how to be aware of their own thinking and behavior (a meta-cognitive skill). Therefore, during the third and fourth weeks of school I conducted brief mini-lessons that each explicitly described and modeled what these “safe and collaborative” classroom behaviors looked like. To “explicitly describe” an inviting behavior, for example, we created a T-chart on the board labeled “Inviting Looks Like” at the top of one column, and “Excluding Looks Like” at the top of the second column. Then we filled the chart with specifically described body language and behaviors, as shown in Table 4.1.

Next, I used my classroom aide to help me model these behaviors. My aide and I portrayed “excluding” behaviors with a comic twist to make them memorable. Together the class made a T-chart later that week with “Listening Looks Like” and “Ignoring Looks Like” labels at the top, as shown in Table 4.2. Again my aide and I

hammed it up to model these behaviors. I used T-charts throughout the year to explicitly describe expected behaviors to students.

Table 4.1: T-Chart Describing Inviting Behaviors and Excluding Behaviors

Inviting Looks Like	**Excluding Looks Like**
• Organizing your bodies and furniture so that everyone is included • Keeping track of who hasn't had a turn yet • Inviting people to share their ideas, even if they aren't in your friendship group • Keeping track of your own participation • Being positive and cheerful to every person in the group, regardless of their opinions or ideas	• Sitting in a way that has someone "outside" of the group – like having your back to someone • Only inviting your friends to talk, or having side conversations with just your friends • Not paying any attention to how much you are talking • Not noticing when someone in the group hasn't said anything • Laughing or being sarcastic about someone's ideas

Table 4.2. T-Chart Describing Listening Behaviors and Ignoring Behaviors

Listening Looks Like	**Ignoring Looks Like**
• Making eye-contact • Nodding sometimes • Acknowledging a point made by the speaker • Looking at page/item referred to by speaker • Showing interest and making connections to what people have said	• Looking out the window • Head on desk • Repeating the same thing that was just said • Having a side conversation • Doodling or playing with shoelaces • Turning back on speaker

One last issue to address in order to set the foundation for a safe, collaborative learning community was the stigma of academic status. Each year Kurt and I struggled with how to give students the assignments and resources most appropriate for their individual needs without causing students to lose status with their peers. For example, some students should be allowed to use calculators during math, while others do not need that accommodation. Some sixth graders can read several books in a week, while for other students it is a more realistic goal for them to finish one book in a month or two. But for most young adolescents, to be seen as "different" from their peers in any way is unacceptable.

To address this issue and to make it clear to the students on our team that they would not always be working on the same exact tasks or using the same materials, Kurt and I tackled the stigma of being given different materials by using an activity called "Fair Brownies." In Fair Brownies a group of five students is given an entire pan of uncut brownies to eat. Groups are limited to five students to make it less likely that the group will finish the whole pan. Brownies are brought in uncut to give the students total control over how to divide up the brownies between them.

To begin the activity, we divided the whole team into groups of five students. We gave each group paper plates, napkins, a butter knife and a whole pan of brownies. The only direction we gave the groups was "Eat and enjoy the brownies." Students looked stunned and asked questions like "Can we eat the whole pan?" We just repeated the one direction and gave no other clarifying information. We avoided interfering in any way, but we watched the group dynamics. This activity helped us identify some of the leaders on the Spartans team. In most groups, some students ate

fewer brownies than their group mates because “that was all they wanted” or “they were full” or “they don’t like brownies.” Only one of the groups divided the pan equally and completely finished the brownies.

When students were done eating, we held a team meeting to discuss the activity. We began the meeting by asking groups how they divided up their brownies, and we had them explain their reasoning. After letting four or five groups share, it became clear that every group member got a “fair” share of the brownies—they got the amount they wanted—even if it was not an “equal” amount of brownies as all the other people in the group received.

When we were sure that most students agreed that they got a “fair” share of brownies, we wrote “Fair ≠ Equal” on the board. To explain the idea of “fair is not always equal” a bit further, we used a medical analogy. We asked the team, would you give a heart attack victim and a paper-cut victim the same medical treatment? We discussed several other medical analogies, acting out some of them to bring in a little comic relief. Finally, we brought up educational examples of “fair is not always equal” such as how Mr. Walker can multiply and divide numbers quickly and easily in his head, but that it takes Mrs. C a longer time to be sure of her answers. We suggested that for some people, like Mrs. C, a calculator is a needed tool, and other people, like Mr. Walker, need a little more time to finish reading a novel. These differences in our abilities did not make either of us less intelligent; they just showed our different strengths. We finished the discussion by explaining that because students also have different strengths, we would sometimes be providing different

tools or materials to Spartans students over the course of the year. If any student ever questioned us about it, we would just say "Fair Brownies."

Fostering a Learning Community

My goal was to create a classroom culture in which students felt safe taking academic risks. I wanted to help my students become active, engaged participants in our classroom learning community. Cazden (2001) writes, "In a community of learners, students have to listen to and learn from each other as well as the teacher…Beyond careful listening herself, the teacher's responsibility is to help peer listening happen" (p. 89). P6 and P7 were classes with wide differences in academic and social status. As part of this study, I attempted to document the classroom management structures and instructional methodologies I used to "help peer listening happen" and to foster a learning community.

Lave and Wenger (1991) define a community of practice as "participation as a way of learning – of both absorbing and being absorbed in – the 'culture of practice'" (p. 94). If "participation is a way of learning," then I felt it was important to find more ways for low-status and quiet students to participate in classroom activities. I needed to teach my students how to listen and learn from each other. Building on Lave and Wenger's idea of a "community of practice," my goal as an educator was to create a classroom in which all students gradually increased their participation in the learning opportunities offered.

In recognizing the need for caring, collaborative learning environments at the middle level, Brown and Knowles (2007) write:

> Young adolescents clearly understand how diverse their academic abilities are. Teachers who create competitive learning situations accentuate the weaknesses and strengths of students. The public comparison is embarrassing for less able students. As a result, they refuse to take the risks necessary for learning to occur. (p. 110)

An alternative to a traditional competitive classroom in which students vie for the teacher's attention is to create a learning community that recognizes all students' voices and fosters collaboration between students. If learning takes place through gradual increases in participation, as Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest, it is important to provide all students greater opportunities to participate in classroom activities. By shifting some of the traditional discourse structures taking place in my classroom, I created more opportunities for all students to participate in their learning.

First, I established three non-traditional discourse structures for whole-class activities. I attempted to set clear expectations for student participation during these whole-class discussions. One of the school "problems" that my students brought up when creating our classroom constitution was the perception that teachers "always" call on the same students, and that sometimes teachers ignore students who have had their hands up "for hours." To address these concerns, I used popsicle sticks with students' names written on them as a way to appear to call on students in a random-like manner. I say "random-like" because pulling popsicle sticks is not always random. For example, after I pulled a child's name, I put that popsicle stick aside for the moment in order to ensure that other students were given a chance to participate. Sometimes I called on a different student than whose name was pulled if I thought a

child was not ready to answer a question; however, I most often held true to the name that was pulled out of the basket.

Being sensitive to learners who need extra processing time, and to students who may not know the answer, the first few times we used the jar of popsicle sticks I made sure my middle school students would not be caught off guard or embarrassed, especially early in the school year. At first, I only used the jar of sticks for simple questions or opinion questions. When I began using it for more challenging material, I always asked the question before pulling the name to provide time for all students to figure out the answer. If I pulled the name of a student who I felt was not ready with an answer, I would either pretend it was someone else's name, or I would pull a second name and make a qualifying statement such as, "Jenny will give us her idea, and then Sara will add on anything Jenny missed."

Using the "popsicle stick" method, I tried to set the tone that everyone was equally important and welcome to participate, not just the students whose hands were always up. The popsicle sticks also established the norm that, in this learning community, everyone was expected to participate. Popsicle sticks created more participation and learning opportunities for students who may not normally raise their hands.

The second way I structured whole-class discussions to promote participation from all students was to remove myself from the discussions in order to give students more "voice." As Cazden (2001) describes, the "traditional" discourse structure in a classroom is the I-R-E/F structure in which the teacher initiates a question, a student responds, and the teacher provides an evaluative comment or feedback. In order to

allow students more control and encourage greater participation than the traditional method provides, at the end of September I began having students call on each other during class discussions. Although this discourse structure does not work well with all discussion topics or lessons, it is especially good for whole-class brainstorming activities.

To introduce this "non-traditional" discourse structure, I made it physically advantageous for students to call on each other. For example, during a whole-class brainstorming activity, I chose to be the scribe at the board. After explaining the task, I started students on a boy-girl pattern of calling on each other, regardless of having hands-up. Having students call on each other was physically advantageous because I did not have to keep turning around to call on students, I could just concentrate on writing down their ideas as fast as possible. This structure allowed whole-class brainstorming sessions to go much faster.

Students acted awkward at first with this unfamiliar discourse structure and were slow to call on classmates. They did not yet have "communicative competence" with this unfamiliar discourse pattern (Cazden, 2001). As they gained more experience and practice, their ability to quickly call on classmates indicated that they were becoming more comfortable with this new discourse structure. For example, students seemed to lose some of the awkwardness of calling on each other (an awkwardness that probably comes from trying to call on friends or members of the opposite sex without offending anyone), and were soon able to just call on the first person they noticed, or to call on students who had not spoken yet. Similar to the popsicle stick discourse structure, having students call on each other also promoted

greater participation and reinforced the norm that participation was an expectation of our learning community and that all voices were valued.

"Teachers who want to change the structure of speaking rights need to consider two physical matters: seating arrangements and their own patterns of gaze," writes Cazden (2001, p.88). In the example given above, I changed the pattern of my gaze by keeping my back to the class and allowing the students to do the work of calling on one-another, thereby taking myself out of the discussion (while also staying aware of what was happening). A third shift I made in our classroom discourse structure included a shift in our physical seating arrangement whenever we read an article or story together as a whole class. During these whole-class reading activities, we all gathered together in a circle of chairs or on the classroom rug, living-room style, to promote a casual, comfortable reading environment. Sometimes I did the reading, or asked students to call on each other to share the reading and the discussion. After suggesting a "call on opposite gender" approach to keep a steady balance of boys' and girls' voices, I often kept my eyes on the text in order to not allow eye-contact with students to turn the focus on me again.

We gathered together living-room style frequently throughout the year. Students soon developed greater communicative competence with this structure, and they became adept at quickly inviting each other to read or share without waiting for students to have their hands up. Sometimes I reminded students to call on people who had not had a chance to participate. Discussions seemed to become more animated when students talked to each other, as shown by the changes in their tone of voice, facial expressions, and expressive body language, different from the sometimes

glazed expressions and "slumped" body language that was more familiar during teacher-led discussions. Plus, students began to look at each other and address each other during the discussions rather than always looking at me.

The fourth but most important non-traditional discourse structure I used to foster a community of learners came in the form of collaborative pairs and small discussion groups. Having used cooperative learning groups for over a decade, I had experienced many occasions when individual students or a small group as a whole did not appear to have a positive learning experience. Therefore, over the years I had developed a discussion skills curriculum of mini-lessons and practice activities with the aim of teaching students a set of discrete social skills needed to work collaboratively, and the academic discourse structures needed to organize and develop their small group discussions to achieve high-level talk. This discussion skills curriculum is discussed in the next section.

Building Competence in Academic Discourse

The Importance of Peer Talk

Young adolescents love to talk to their peers, so it makes sense that developing discourse structures in which students talk to each other during class would be one way to foster social and emotional development along with curricular goals. Cazden (2001) writes, "it seems possible that students will be more apt to actively struggle with new ideas—rephrasing them, arguing with them, conceptually trying them out and verbally trying them on—when they are spoken by (less authoritative) peers than by the (more authoritative) teacher" (p. 111). In other

words, students may be more likely to take academic risks talking about content when they are in small groups. In his book, *The Guided Construction of Knowledge*, Neil Mercer (1995) describes language as a "social mode of thinking" (p. 4). "Language," Mercer writes, "is therefore not just a means by which individuals can formulate ideas and communicate them, it is also a means for people to think and learn together" (1995, p. 4). When middle level students work together in pairs or small groups, they commonly bounce ideas off of each other and gradually come to jointly-created new understandings. Academic talk, or talking about the content under study, is important to developing greater comfort with and understanding of the material.

As Brown and Knowles (2007) write, however, "Never assume that students already know how to work collaboratively" (p. 159). Furthermore, as I have discovered over my years of experience with small groups, even when children understand the social norms for group work and are able to work together without social difficulties, it does not mean that they are achieving high-quality academic discourse. Cazden (2001) writes:

> It has always been the case that formal schooling requires forms of discourse that are different from the informal talk of home and street. The more different these new forms are, the more attention we have to pay to helping all students learn to enact the new roles…In other words, part of the new curriculum has to be not only individual cognitive processes of learning but the social processes of discourse itself. (p. 6)

Understanding the social norms for group work and developing competency in academic discourse are both skills that teachers can help middle level students

develop. To help students develop these skills, I implemented a curriculum that attempted to teach the "social processes of discourse."

A Graduated Series of Lessons

Having set the foundations for a positive classroom climate and established whole-class discourse structures that would promote student participation, I began the series of lessons designed to build collaboration and discussion skills among my students. By implementing these skills, it was my goal that students would develop competence in academic discourse, thereby allowing them to become "full participants" in our learning community. One objective of this study was to explore the impact of these mini-lessons on student participation and on small group dynamics.

The discussion skills curriculum was a graduated series of lessons designed to teach new social and discussion skills. I used a variety of formative assessments to monitor student progress, including teacher observations using the Teacher Observation Device described in Chapter 3. Using this observation chart, I sat with a small group and used codes to collect data about the group's discussion. In addition, I provided instant feedback to groups or individual students, similar to the teacher scaffolding described by Maloch (2002) when the teacher interjected into her fifth graders' discussions to model a discussion skill with which they were struggling. I also coached students to develop the meta-cognitive ability of monitoring their own discussions through the use of discourse markers I designed called "talk tickets," modeled after Kagan's "talking chips" and described in detail later in this section (Chiaravalloti, 2010). When it was clear to me that the class had become proficient

Table 4.3: Discussion Skills Curriculum Scope and Sequence Chart

Month	Focus Areas
September	• Creating a Classroom Constitution • Building a "safe" classroom climate • Establishing whole-class discourse structures • Setting criteria for "good" discussions
October	• Using "Talk Tickets" for the first time • Inviting others to share • Monitoring equitable participation • Understanding the effects of body language on discussions
November	• Facilitating skills (inviting & organizing tasks) • Understanding importance of silences & wait time • Avoiding a discussion with one dominant participant • Monitoring group & self participation (meta-cognition)
December	• Facilitating skills continue (inviting & wait time) • Monitoring discussion equity, cont. (meta-cognition) • Avoiding & repairing interruptions • Using Bloom's Taxonomy to create high-level thinking & discussion questions
January	• Monitoring discussion equity & quality (meta-cog.) • Using evidence to support ideas in discussion • Asking others for supporting evidence
February	• Monitoring discussion quality, cont. (meta-cognition) • Building on ideas to create and add meaning • Making personal, text, & world connections
March	• Community Service Learning projects –focusing on partner cooperation in research & writing
April/May	• Respectfully disagreeing • Debating (with rebuttals) • Monitoring quality of discussion continues
May/June	• Emphasis on critical thinking skills • Monitoring quality of discussion (meta-cognition) • Roll of Thunder Lit Circles as summative assessment

with the current skill under study, I moved on to teach and model the next, more complex discussion skill in a year-long sequence shown in Table 4.3.

Establishing Performance Baselines

Early in the fall, I conducted an activity in which the students generated a list of behaviors that described a "high-quality" discussion. Students were able to come up with a full list of basic criteria for good discussions. They knew, for example, that good discussions are supposed to be equitable—that no one is left out and no one is too dominant. They knew that participants need to be good listeners, should stay on task, and should always be nice to each other, even if they disagreed or were not friends. Students could also explain that volume, tone of voice, and body language mattered in a good discussion. We consolidated all of these ideas into a manageable list, and then posted the "Good Discussion Criteria" poster where it could be seen.

Next, I began making base-line observations of my students' behaviors and skills as they participated in small groups. These observations were important as they would be one way I would document growth in students' discussion skills over time. In these base-line observations I watched for:

- students who consistently dominated conversations
- students who got off task as soon as the teacher walked away
- groups that were actively engaged and progressing through the task
- groups that were struggling
- students who never or rarely participated
- students who talked, but were ignored
- students who were peer leaders without dominating the group
- students who participated successfully and offered valuable ideas

I conducted these initial observations during small group discussions held in my English language arts classes and social studies classes. In ELA, these baseline discussions involved the short autobiographical text, The Acorn People, by Ron Jones (1976), and the topics for discussion were provided by me. In social studies, one activity used for these initial observations was a group task involving the identification and evaluation of primary and secondary sources. For these initial observations, I collected data by taking field notes. These field notes were notes on a clipboard or that I carried around the room with me. I jotted down quick, bulleted notes during the activity, and I later wrote up the notes with more detail into my journal.

A Gradual Progression of Skills

The discussion skills curriculum was meant to gradually develop the social and academic discourse skills students need to participate successfully in a small group. "Successful participation" is defined here as participating equitably in the small group task or discussion, staying focused and on task during the activity, and demonstrating competence with the social skills and discussion skills practiced so far. "Equitable participation" is defined here as having a share of the "turns" in a discussion relative to a student's current social and academic abilities. In other words, a student who is painfully shy would not be expected to participate as often as a student who is gregarious, but the shy student would still be expected to participate several times by being invited or by gaining the floor herself. Likewise, the gregarious student would be expected to restrain herself from interrupting other students and from dominating the conversation. As students gained competence in

academic discourse, the equity of participation among group members would be expected to increase.

Similar to observations made by Cohen and Lotan (1995) during their own studies of cooperative learning groups, in the years prior to this study I had found that for some students, participation rates never increased even with explicit instruction in discourse skills. I intended to use this study to more systematically track my instructional methods, to explore how small groups were functioning in my classroom, and to examine the possible effects that peer status was having on small group participation.

During the first week of October I used "talk tickets" for the first time. Talk tickets are my adaptation of Kagan's (1989) original "talking chips" cooperative learning structure. In Kagan's original form, students each received two talk tickets, or some limited number, as a way to limit the amount of times vocal students could share in a discussion, thus automatically ensuring other students would get an equal chance to talk. I liked this idea, but found that the vocal students invariably talked first and "took" all the good ideas, leaving the struggling students with little to say even though they had the floor. By making the tickets unlimited, and by adding a variety of shapes that helped to scaffold discussion skills, I discovered that students were free to build an in-depth, sophisticated discussion while also having a visual reminder of how much each person was talking.

Talk tickets are colored shapes cut from colored index card stock that I created to make the discussion process "visible" for students (Chiaravalloti, 2010). Talk tickets are multi-colored so that each participant in the group has an assigned

color. These colors allow students and teachers to monitor individual contributions to a group discussion at a glance. Each colored set of talk tickets also has three shapes: rectangles to mark a contribution or "turn," triangles to mark an invitation, and circles to mark a request for evidence or expansion of an idea. The triangle and circle shapes also have sentence starter prompts to help students if they need additional scaffolding with those two discourse skills. During group discussions, each small group is given an envelope with five different-colored sets of talk ticket shapes inside.

The first day that we used talk tickets I gave students only the rectangular shapes. Students were directed to choose a color and sort the talk tickets into separate piles. Once everyone in the groups was ready, I gave the students a single direction: "Put a colored slip in the center of the table each time you contribute an idea to the discussion." We had just finishing reading The Acorn People, which had an uplifting

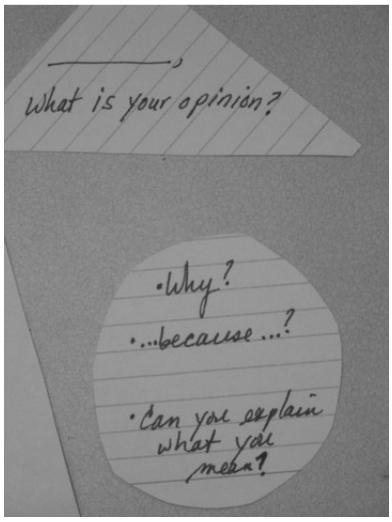

Figure 4.3: Talk Ticket Shapes Used to Structure and Build Discussion

final chapter but a sad epilog. The discussion question was, "Should Ron Jones have included the Epilog? Why or why not?" This question had been the warm-up in class that day, so students had already had time to consider their response and had jotted down a few bulleted notes. Now that we were set up, it was time to begin.

I told the students they had five minutes and set a timer, signaling the groups to begin. It was a loud, emotional discussion, and it worked well to demonstrate the point I was trying to make—that although the students knew what good discussions look like, as demonstrated by the chart of "good" discussion skills we had created the previous week, they were not yet actually creating high-quality discussions. The students I had observed during my base-line observations as the students who often talked first, loudest, or most frequently, were again the students who immediately dominated the conversation, somehow adding a half dozen tickets to the center of the table in moments. Likewise, the students I had earlier observed as being shy or hesitant to participate once again held back and added few or no tickets to the pile in the center of the table during the five minute discussion.

After five minutes I stopped the groups and instructed students not to touch the piles at all, but just to look at them. At first, a few of the students who had dominated the conversations shouted out triumphantly the number of tickets they had in the pile, and big grins were seen around the room. I silently pointed to the "Good Discussion Criteria" poster that we had made together, and many students' voices quieted down. I even heard one girl say, "Oh" as she realized what had happened at her table.

We then debriefed. I asked the students what went well in their discussions and asked about problems. Thanks to the visual markers of the talk tickets, the students easily identified that one of the biggest problems was that not everyone participated equally. I asked my students why they thought that not all people in the group participated equally. I found this to be a tricky part of the debriefing because it needed to be handled in such a way so as to not make the shy, timid students feel at fault. As soon as a student volunteered, "Because so-and-so didn't talk much," I asked, "Why not?" Together we made a list of the possible reasons why people do not always get an "equal opportunity" to participate, and I was careful to use that

Figure 4.4: A group of students using talk tickets to visually track their discussion

exact phrase in the title of our list. During this follow up brainstorming session, students came up with quite a few reasons why people do not always get an equal opportunity to share, including "some people talk too much," "only the boys talked"

(although another group reported that only the girls talked), “some people do not know the answer,” and “some people are too bossy.”

The next day, I introduced the first two focus areas for building discussion skills: 1) equitable participation by inviting others to share, and 2) being aware of the affect of body language on the quality of the discussion. After introducing these two focus areas and posting them on the board, I initiated a mock discussion. My classroom aide and I had pre-planned certain “bad” behaviors on my part, and shy, meek behaviors on her part. We invited a few student volunteers to join us, planning to have them share opinions as they usually would. The topic I chose was school uniforms, and since students generally have strong opinions about this subject, there was no preparation needed for the student volunteers.

In this mock discussion, I acted loudly and aggressively, and I purposely turned my chair so that I was half blocking my aide, with my back facing her. The few times she tried to make a comment, I immediately interrupted and cut her off (much to the shock and laughter of my students). We kept the model discussion short, and then asked the class for feedback. Students were quick to describe my dominating behaviors and the way I interrupted others or did not let others talk much. They identified my behavior toward my aide as an excluding behavior, and they noticed that I studied my nails whenever someone else was talking, a behavior they categorized as “not listening” and “rude.”

Having seen a dramatically over-acted model of what a low-quality discussion looked like, and with talk tickets ready to use as visible discussion markers, students now practiced having equitable discussions in the same groups as earlier. I did this

second discussion the very next day so that the new skills were fresh in my students' minds. My classroom aide and I circulated around the room. I collected field notes and made note of whenever I noticed a skill I was looking for demonstrated by a student. In one group, for example, Jennifer began the conversation by inviting someone else to share. I immediately made a note, and when the discussion was over I highlighted Jennifer's action for the class as we debriefed and discussed how this second round of discussions went.

I set up other practice discussions during the month of October in my ELA and social studies classes. In ELA, two discussions were related to our next reading piece and involved further practice with the visual help of talk tickets. In social studies, students had to work together to build a 3-D model of a plateau and a plain, complete with a complex irrigation system like that created by the ancient Sumerians. I pointed out to students after the social studies modeling activity that, without the use of talk tickets (which were not logistically feasible to use while building a 3-D model together), students had to monitor, or pay attention to, their own participation and that of their group mates. I used the term "meta-cognition" for the first time and explained that it means to be aware of your own thinking processes; or in the case of working in groups, to be aware of your own and your group's quality of discussion or share in the activity. We talked about how the ultimate goal was to have a high-quality discussion or successful group learning activity without the help of discussion markers like the talk tickets.

It is not feasible to describe the entire discussion skills curriculum here. An outline of the curriculum was shown earlier in Table 10. I will, however, share three

other mini-lessons here because I believe they were important in creating a successful group experience. Evidence to support this claim will be discussed in Chapter 6. The full discussion skills curriculum can be found in Appendix B.

One of these important mini-lessons is to teach the skill of facilitating. As I discovered during the performance baseline observations I conducted in September, some of my students were natural facilitators; they noticed when someone was not participating and had the ability to invite that person into a conversation. Some of these students were also natural leaders who could help a group stay on task. I felt it was important to identify these facilitating behaviors for the whole class, and it was important for all students to begin to develop these group skills. Facilitating skills were focused on and practiced at the end of October.

The first facilitating skills lesson was to create a Venn diagram. We wrote "Facilitating Looks Like" on one side and "Participating Looks Like" on the other side. I used a Venn diagram instead of a T-chart because I wanted students to see the differences between ordinary participation and the skills specific to facilitation, but I also wanted students to see that participating skills are sometimes the same skills as facilitating skills. For example, although it might be the "job" of the assigned facilitator to invite people to participate, "inviting others" is an important skill for all participants in a discussion.

The next day I brought out the talk tickets again, and this time students discovered there was a new shape added—triangles. These triangles were color-coded to match the rectangular strips students had already been using. There were four triangles for each color, and the triangles all had sentence starters on them to help

students invite others to participate. For example, one sentence starter read, "What do you think, (insert student name) ?" Another sentence starter began, "_____, what is your opinion about _____?" I reminded students about the importance of giving everyone an opportunity to express their ideas, explained the new talk ticket shapes, and then gave students five minutes to practice using them with that day's discussion question.

Using the talk tickets provided a concrete reminder to students to try out the new skill, while also providing a way for me to track student progress with the skill of inviting others to share. By the end of the five minutes, I could see who had been successful with inviting someone to share and who might need some one-to-one guidance and practice with the skill. We continued to use the triangle-shaped talk tickets for several more discussions over the next two weeks until it was clear that the majority of students could apply this discussion skill.

Figure 4.5: A small group uses talk tickets to track discussion

Another discussion skill important to engaging in a high-quality discussion is the skill of expanding ideas and supporting ideas with evidence. Mercer describes the difference between three types of small group talk: disputational talk, cumulative talk, and exploratory talk. As Mercer (1995) explains, disputational talk "is characterized by disagreement and individualized decision making" (p. 104). This might be the kind of talk seen in a group with a bossy, dominating group member. Cumulative talk is when "speakers build positively but uncritically on what the other has said. Partners use talk to construct a 'common knowledge' by accumulation" (p. 104). Finally, in exploratory talk, students critically engage in each others' ideas; they challenge each other's hypotheses and try out new ideas. As Mercer (1995) explains, "Compared with the other two types, in exploratory talk *knowledge is made more publicly accountable* and *reasoning is more visible in the talk* [italics original]" (p. 104). When students can critically challenge each other's ideas and offer alternative hypotheses, when they can add on to each other's thinking and develop an idea while explaining their reasoning, they are engaging in the highest level of discourse called exploratory talk.

Once again I used new talk ticket shapes to introduce the new skill of asking someone to expand on an idea or provide evidence from a text. In January, I brought out the talk tickets again and this time I had added circle shapes to match with the other colored shapes in each group's envelope. On these circle shapes I had written sentence starters such as, "Can you give an example of what you mean?" and "<u>(insert student name)</u>, what do you think about _____'s idea? What would you add?"

Before using the new shapes, I conducted a model discussion in front of the class in which my classroom aide and I asked each other these types of questions. With the class we discussed the difference between having an idea or opinion and being able to support the idea or opinion with evidence or examples (a skill we had been practicing extensively in writing). Then we used the talk tickets, along with the new shapes, to discuss social studies topics under study such as "Is Sargon the Great really so great?" and "Was Hammurabi's Code of Laws fair?" Before the discussions began students were given time to review their notes and texts, form an opinion, and gather evidence for their ideas. Similar to previous discussions, groups were given a set amount of time for their discussion and I monitored the conversations by listening in, making notes on the teacher observation chart, and by watching the use of talk tickets at each table.

Although there are many other mini-lessons and activities in the discussion skills curriculum, the final type of activity I will describe here is my use of "fish bowl" discussions (Baloche, Mauger, Willis, Filinuk, & Michalsky, 1993). A fish bowl discussion is when a small group holds a discussion in the middle of the classroom while everyone else watches from the periphery (hence the name "fish bowl"). I have found that fish bowl discussions (similar to Socratic seminars) are a way to reinforce the social and group discussion skills under study. For example, when I first taught inviting skills, that same week I asked for volunteers to participate in a quick fish bowl discussion. The class was asked to watch for inviting behaviors, and for problems the group had with equitable participation. At the end of the discussion, the class shared their observations with the people in the fish bowl group.

Because the students on the outside circle are not participating in the group, they are not trying to engage in the content under discussion while also trying to use a new discussion skill. Fish bowl discussions allow students to watch a discussion while focusing only on looking for a particular discussion skill in use, instead of also having to listen and participate in the conversation.

The Student Reflection Piece

An important part of the discussion skill curriculum I used during this study was the student reflection piece. After most discussions or group activities, students were asked to evaluate their own behaviors and the behaviors of their group as a whole. Using a Likert scale, from 1 to 5, students rated themselves and their group as a whole on their discussion skills. I included three or four questions on the reflection slips, usually tailored to discussion skills under study. If there was enough time, I asked students to also explain each of their ratings on the slip. Students were also told they could write notes at the bottom about any problems the group had during the activity. This private communication method was important because it allowed students to "save face" in front of their peers if there was a concern. Student reflections allowed me to catch problems I might have missed during my observations and revealed particular students who needed one-on-one follow-up instruction. I used these reflections as one source of data to help me plan for the next discussion activity. In addition, these written reflections helped students realize they were being held accountable for their own small group participation and behavior.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the community, school, and classroom context of this study. From the point of view of the teacher-researcher, this chapter explored the steps that I took to structure the learning context in a way that would promote participation and learning opportunities for all of the students in my classes, regardless of their academic abilities or social status. I used the field notes and reflective journal I kept during this study to identify many of the lessons and activities I used to promote a community of learners in my classroom during the year of this study.

This chapter also discussed the importance of "peer talk" in the learning process (Cazden, 2001; Mercer, 1995). I described three non-traditional classroom discourse structures I employed as a way to promote greater participation from students during whole class discussions. I outlined the scope and sequence of the curriculum I developed with the aim of helping students to become increasingly competent with group skills and academic discourse. I illustrated the use of "talk tickets" during small group discussions as a concrete way to help middle level students learn to track participation and group dynamics while also encouraging high-level discussion skills. Finally, I described the importance of the student reflection piece in the process of learning academic discourse and group discussion skills.

In the next chapter I profile the Spartans team, its two class groups, and the focal students of this study. I also describe the methods I used to determine students' peer status, and I share some of the peer status data.

CHAPTER 5

PARTICIPANT PROFILES AND PEER STATUS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is three-fold: First, I introduce the participants of this study, the forty-eight students of the Spartans team, by providing an ethnographic look at the culture of the team and its two class groups. I use the "insider's perspective" of the teacher-researcher to further develop a holistic picture of the students and culture of the Spartans team. Second, I describe the peer status data collected during the study and I provide the distribution of peer status rankings for students in each class group. Finally, I explain the criteria I used to select a focal group of students for this study. I provide brief profiles of the students in the focal group, and introduce five patterns of small group participation.

The Spartans Team

Team Culture

The Spartans team is composed of two class groups, Kurt Walker's homeroom class, known as P7, and my homeroom class, known as P6. The class groups get their names from the room numbers of their homerooms. As described in Chapter 4, the Spartans is a two-teacher team. Kurt is the team's math and science teacher, and I am the team's English language arts and social studies teacher. At the time of this

study, Kurt and I had been teammates for twelve years. Over that time we had attempted to establish a strong, supportive team culture for our students.

During the 2009-2010 school year, the year of this study, the Spartans was an inclusion team; we had special education students on our team, each of whom had an individualized education plan, or IEP. Eleven of the forty-eight Spartans' students were special education students, just under 25% of the team. Due to new budgetary constraints in our school district, our team's special educator was with us only part time, usually in ELA classes, and we did not have a classroom aide until December.

In addition to special education students, the Spartans also had a large group of academically gifted students on our team. Nineteen of the 48 students on the team, or 40%, had scored "Advanced" on the 5th grade math or ELA MCAS test, or both. The MCAS tests, or Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests, are the state's standardized tests that students take each year from 3rd grade to 10th grade. Because of a shortage of staff, Kurt and I were often on our own to provide the appropriate academic and social-emotional supports for the academically diverse group of students on our team.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Phelps Middle School has two feeder elementary schools, Donovan Elementary School and Madison Elementary School. Because Madison shares part of our building, students coming over from Madison have the advantage of already knowing their way around much of the school. When new sixth graders enter their new school and new classrooms each year, there is an instant social divide with the former Madison students having higher status for being on "home turf" compared to the Donovan students. By the end of September each year,

many students end up organizing themselves into social groups based on their elementary school or socio-economic backgrounds.

In an attempt to build a supportive team culture, Kurt and I had put in place several structures intended to create a safe, welcoming, and academically stimulating environment for all students on the team. On the first day of school we held our first team meeting, thereby attempting to unite the students from both elementary schools and both homerooms into a single entity, the Spartans team. Kurt and I established shared behavioral and academic expectations across the team, including highly structured classroom routines that were similar in both of our rooms.

In recent years, administrators and parents had noted that Kurt and I had generated a "family-like" atmosphere on the Spartans team. For example, one structure we had put in place to foster a supportive environment was the Spartans Study Group, held every Monday and Thursday after school. Stocked with plenty of parent-donated snacks, the after school session was popular with Spartans students of all social groups and academic abilities who wanted to get their homework done, work on projects, or study for upcoming assessments. Together with team building activities, regular team meetings to distribute Spartans' Shield of Endeavor Awards (similar to student of the month awards), team parties, and our highly structured weekly and daily classroom routines, Kurt and I attempted to establish a strong team identity for our students. Within the overall team culture, however, each year the two class groups on the Spartans team also develop their own unique cultures and identities.

P6 Class Profile

P6 is my homeroom class. Our school principal creates all of the class groups in the school using data gathered from student information forms completed by teachers at the end of each school year, parent placement letters, and suggestions from school guidance personnel. During the year of this study, there were twenty-five students in my homeroom, fifteen girls and ten boys.

Of the ten boys in P6, five of the boys were from Donovan Elementary and five were from Madison Elementary, but they did not divide themselves into social groups based on elementary school. From the beginning these boys joined together as one large group in structured and unstructured activities, perhaps because many of them played sports together in town leagues. With the exception of one boy, Hunter, the boys in P6 worked well with each other regardless of group composition. They were a group of students that acted in kind and tolerant ways to each other. None of the boys in the class appeared to like Hunter—he made crude jokes, often giggled loudly, teased others incessantly, and was frequently off task—but the other boys worked with him anyway, and were usually patient with Hunter's antics. Hunter is one of the students profiled later in this chapter.

Of the fifteen girls in P6, five were from Donovan and nine were from Madison. One girl had moved here from another town. In September, the girls divided themselves into two groups that reflected their elementary school and socio-economic background. The Donovan girls became their own social group, and the Madison girls divided themselves into two groups, a group of six from the wealthy neighborhood behind the school, and a group of three from a middle-class

neighborhood in the center of town. One Madison girl did not appear to have any friends, but she befriended the girl new to town. These social divisions among the girls were visible at lunch, during unstructured times such as class parties, and in the girls' participation in outside clubs and activities. Similar to the boys, however, the girls in P6 worked well together in small groups, even when working with girls outside their social group. With the occasional exception of Hunter, the girls in P6 also worked well with the boys in the class.

Academically, there were wide variations in students' abilities in P6. There were four students in the class who had IEPs, two boys and two girls. One of the boys with an IEP, John, was severely delayed in his reading abilities by two or more years, and his writing ability was at or below third grade level. The two girls in P6 who had IEPs each had difficulties with reading comprehension and were performing at a fourth or fifth grade instructional level. On the other end of the academic spectrum, there were eleven students in P6 who had earned an "Advanced" score on either the math or ELA state standardized tests, or both. The other boy in the class with an IEP, Evan, was highly successful academically, but was diagnosed as being on the Autism spectrum. He was high functioning but had difficulty reading the emotions and intentions of his peers during social interactions. The P6 class profile is summarized in Table 5.1.

Even with this diverse social and academic landscape, the students in P6 appeared to work well with each other during small group activities. There were no loud, dominating personalities in P6. As a group, these students acted kind,

Table 5.1: P6 Class Profile

Gender			5th Grade MCAS Scores			Elementary School		
	# in Class	IEPs	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	from Madison	from Donovan	New to town
boys	10	2	6	2	2	5	5	
girls	15	2	5	8	2	9	5	1
Totals	25	4	11	10	4	15	10	1

tolerant and patient. Students in P6 appeared to value academic success. As I recorded in my professional journal that first week of school, my 2009-2010 homeroom class seemed special:

> **September 1, 2009:** Today was the first day, and it was a great beginning. My homeroom was amazing. Excellent listeners, great at following directions, helpful to each other, and full of smiles and friendliness.
>
> **September 3, 2009:** My homeroom is awesome. I loved them immediately. They are quick to pick up on expectations, work hard, and have a calming group persona. I am very excited about working with this group.

The first month of school was unusually smooth with the P6 class group. There were a lot more girls than boys in the class but neither gender seemed to dominate. Over the course of the school year, P6 continued to be a group of students who worked well together with few difficulties.

P7 Class Profile

P7 is Kurt's homeroom class and the other class group on the Spartans team. During the year of this study, P7 had 23 students, eleven boys and twelve girls. Of the twelve girls, only one girl came from Donovan Elementary, and of the eleven boys, three came from Donovan. The rest of the class came from Madison Elementary School. Even with so few students from Donovan, it did not appear that students in Kurt's homeroom were forming social groups based on former elementary schools. Instead, the boys' social groups appeared to be based upon participation in the town's football league, and the girls' social groups appeared to be based upon sports, current fashion trends and popularity. Most of the girls in P7 were athletes, were fashion conscious, and were always quick to grab the latest *Girls' Life* magazines from my bookshelf. They often shared tales from soccer, field hockey, or dance. All but three of the girls in P7 formed a large, tight-knit social group.

The remaining three girls did not follow current fashion trends and did not appear to be interested in the typical middle school girls' social scene. One of these girls, Kayla, was on the Autism spectrum, struggled with academics, and carried stuffed animals with her everywhere she went. Another girl, Mia, was heavy and tall for her age and was extraordinarily gifted in math, science, and language arts. Rachel was the third girl in this group, a short girl with dark hair and a sharp wit. None of these girls participated in dance or other athletics. They came over from Madison Elementary School as friends and remained that way for a large part of sixth grade.

Of the eleven boys in P7, eight participated in the town's football league or played lacrosse together. Of the three boys who were not part of the football/lacrosse

group, all three were unusually bright. One of these boys, Jonathan, had an IEP for executive functioning disorder and anxiety. Jonathan was incredibly bright but became stressed over making decisions. He had difficulty with organizing and communicating his thoughts. Jonathan's biggest challenge was coping with a crippling level of anxiety. There were times when Jonathan bit his nails until they bled, pulled out his eyelashes, and on a few rare occasions even hit himself repeatedly on the head as a result of his extreme anxiety. Another boy in this group of three was Haani, an academically gifted boy who was deeply concerned with high achievement. Haani got visibly upset any time he did not earn a perfect score on an assignment. Ben, the third boy in this group, was gifted in math and had a vivid imagination; he created whole new worlds in stories and cartoons, and he had a terrific sense of humor. These three boys did not play on sports teams and did not seem to have much in common with the other boys in the class, although Ben was popular for his jokes.

As the school year progressed, some of the boys' social groups in P7 changed. The boys ended up forming three distinct groups, each of which appeared to be based more on academic success and reading interests than on sports. Jonathan, Haani, and Ben were all avid readers, particularly of fantasy books such as the Lord of the Rings series by J.R.R. Tolkien and the Percy Jackson series by Rick Riordan. These academically talented boys were eventually joined by one other boy, Will, who was a football player but who was also more interested in fantasy books and reading than were any of his football friends. For the large group of boys in the class, academics were necessary but did not appear to be valued, and reading was something done for school.

The third social group of boys in P7 developed when two boys on the football team, Tony and Nick, ended up forming their own small group. Tony and Nick each had an IEP and they were taking a reading class together in place of Spanish (a class most students take). Tony had a terrific sense of humor, but his mom was dying of cancer; she died in December. His emotional struggles with his mother's illness, combined with his academic difficulties, began to make Tony stand out from his classmates. Nick was two years below grade-level in reading and struggled with the fine motor skills needed to write legibly. Nick wrote in large, block letters, similar to letters written by first graders. Nick was a compassionate young man with similar academic challenges as Tony, so it was not surprising when he and Tony became close friends.

By January, another shift in the P7 social scene occurred with the three girls who had come over together as friends from Madison Elementary School, Kayla, Mia, and Rachel. As described, Kayla was on the Autism spectrum. She was several years behind her peers academically and socially. She looked and behaved like an eight-year-old. I captured a picture of her in my journal in first month of school:

> **September 1, 2009:** Kayla brought a dozen or so stuffed animals with her to school today (all WebKins). Kayla looks a bit young for her age.
>
> **October 3, 2009:** Kayla continues to bring two stuffed animals to school every day (unheard of among sixth graders), and continues to need a great deal of teacher guidance on basic tasks. She draws puppy dogs on all her papers.

Adding to the stuffed animals and puppy dog drawings, Kayla had difficulty reading social cues and emotions in her classmates. She often had a bland expression on her face, and if she was not sure of how to respond to a classmate's question, she would remain mute. This combination of behaviors made working with Kayla awkward for many of her peers. Possibly due to the social demands of middle school, Kayla's two friends, Mia and Rachel, who had always worked so well with Kayla, began to pull away from her in January. By February, Mia and Rachel were rarely found walking together with Kayla; instead, Kayla was seen trailing behind them around the school. The girls appeared to tolerate her presence and still permitted Kayla to eat lunch at their table. Although never outright mean to her, by spring Mia and Rachel no longer actively extended their friendship to Kayla.

In my journal are snapshots of students on the opposite ends of the social and academic spectrums in the P7 class group. There were eight highly gifted students in the class—students who had scored "Advanced" on one or both of the state tests. Mia and Haani were two of these students. I wrote about them in my journal:

> **October 3, 2009:** One student, Haani, is extra-talented in all subjects and proclaimed to the whole class today that he "loves homework on weekends" (the equivalent of social death in middle school); his family is from India and his parents have extremely high academic expectations. Another student, Mia, is a self-proclaimed pagan who dresses in a range of styles from the 60s, 70s, and 80s. Her 5th grade teacher wrote "walks to her own beat - eccentric at times." She is an avid reader, incredibly talented in math, and she might know more vocabulary words than I do.

As described earlier, there were also quite a few academically challenged students in Kurt's homeroom. The class had several girls and boys with significant academic and emotional challenges, two of which I described in my journal early in the year:

> **October 3, 2009:** Kurt's class has a student [Nick] who requires an FM receiver to assist with his auditory processing. He is incredibly low functioning in math for a 6th grader, has an IEP, reads at the 3rd grade level, and can barely read his own writing. In addition, one of the girls in the class [Grace] has an IEP and needs a great deal of help in all subjects, but she gets so embarrassed if a teacher sits next to her that she goes home upset.

With such a spread of learning styles and abilities and often with no other adult in the classroom to offer support, Kurt and I found that it became an enormous challenge to meet the diverse needs of the P7 class group. Although P7 had an even distribution of students with high, middle, and low academic achievement, as shown by the MCAS scores in the P7 Class Profile in Table 5.2, the numbers do not accurately reflect the actual academic or social gaps in the class. For example, of the eight students who earned "Advanced" on the math MCAS test, four of them earned a perfect score, which is extremely unusual. These students were so mathematically gifted that Kurt was providing them with high-school-level enrichment materials. On the opposite end of the spectrum, all seven of the students who earned "Needs Improvement" on MCAS were still working on multiplication facts and long division. Some students, like Haani and Mia, had advanced vocabularies and expanded world views while others, like Nick, were reading three years below grade level. In

addition, with half of a football team in the class, P7 had many active boys who struggled with the physical constraints of middle school, especially as it was their first school year with no recess.

Table 5.2: P7 Class Profile

P7 Class Profile			5th Grade MCAS Scores			Elementary School		
	# in Class	Have IEPs	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	from Madison	from Donovan	New to town
boys	11	4	3	3	5	7	3	1
girls	12	2	5	5	2	11	1	0
Totals	23	6	8	8	7	18	4	1

In summary, the beginning of the school year was not smooth for P7. Socially and academically, there were wide divides in the P7 class group. Even though students were often helpful to classmates on independent tasks, students in P7 were very different from each other and did not work well together in small groups. Some of the girls in P7 had strong, dominating personalities. Early in the year when some of the more "popular" girls would be asked to work with Mia or Kayla, for example, the awkwardness was tangible. Not-so-subtle looks suggesting annoyance would be exchanged with "best friends" from across the room. Sometimes Kayla would get ignored and would sit watching the group instead of participating. Mia, who was bright and headstrong, would often be observed having an argument with one of the

popular girls. Similar difficulties occurred in this class with small groups of boys and mixed gender groups, depending on the academic and social mix of the group. The students in P7 needed a lot of help with learning to work together in small groups in a way that honored their unique personalities while also meeting their diverse abilities.

Peer Status

Rationale for Exploring Peer Status

Research shows that small group, cooperative learning is one instructional methodology that can potentially meet the needs of diverse class groups and stimulate high-level thinking (Kagan, 1989; Slavin, Madden, & Stevens, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 1998). Talk among students is important because it "offers pupils the chance to involve other people in their thoughts—to use conversations to develop their own thoughts" (Mercer, 1995, p. 4). As Mercer explains, through talk "suggestions are offered…these may be challenged or counter-challenged, but challenges are justified and alternative hypotheses are offered" (1995, p. 104). I have been using small group activities in my classroom for over a decade and have discovered their potential for creating engaging, high-level thinking and learning opportunities for students of all academic levels.

I have also learned over the years, however, that not all small groups are successful, even with highly structured group tasks. One aim of this study was to explore how small groups functioned in my classroom, especially when the groups were composed of academically and socially diverse students. As Cohen and Lotan write, "the student who dominates the group and the student who fails to participate or to whom no one ever listens represent two sides of the same coin—a status

problem in the group" (1997, p.61). Status characteristics are defined by Cohen and Lotan as "agreed-upon social rankings where people believe that it is better to be in the high than in the low state" (1997, p. 64). Because not all of the small groups in my classes achieve success (in terms of group cooperation, equity of participation, and/or completion of the task), one question I had when developing this study was about the possible effects, if any, of peer status on small group success. To explore this question, I needed to collect data about the academic and social status of students in both of the Spartans' class groups. My methods for collecting this peer status data were modeled after the sociometric device developed by Cohen and Lotan (1997) as described in Chapter 3. A copy of the device is shown in Figure 5.1.

Help Mrs. C Form Small Groups!

The purpose of this activity:

- to tell Mrs. C who you like to work with in groups
- to give Mrs. C some options when making high-quality groups

Part 1: Friends

1. Circle the names of the students in class whom you most consider friends
2. You must circle at least **two** boys' names and **two** girls' names
3. You may circle as many names as you want

Part 2: Best at Subjects

1. In this section, tell Mrs. C which students in the class you think are best at ELA and social studies
2. **It does not matter** if the person is your friend or not
3. Circle at least **two** boys' names and at least **two** girls' names
4. Circle as many names as you want
5. Choose people you **most respect for quality of work** in these subjects

Figure 5.1: Sample Student Sociometric Device

Description of P6 and P7 Peer Status Data

After administering the sociometric device, I first collected data regarding students' social status. This data was collected by organizing and analyzing students' responses to Prompt #1: Friends.

In P6, the fewest names circled by any student was four, two boys' names and two girls' names. The highest number of names circled by an individual student was eleven. The average number of students chosen as "friends" in the P6 class group was 6.48. On average, boys chose 2.8 girls as friends and 3.44 boys as friends. On average, girls chose 4.4 girls as friends and 2.13 boys as friends. When averaging together friends of both genders, the boys in P6 chose an average of 6.24 classmates as friends and the girls chose an average of 6.53 classmates as friends. Overall, students in P6 chose an average of 6.48 classmates as friends, as shown in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3: Average number of classmates chosen as "Friends" by students in P6

P6	Avg. # girls chosen	Avg. # boys chosen	Overall Average
Chosen by boys	2.80	3.50	6.40
Chosen by girls	4.40	2.13	6.53
		Overall by Class	6.48

I also wanted to know the frequency with which individual students chose two names, four names, and so on. I counted the number of times students in P6 chose two, three, four, or more students as friends. I distributed the frequency of the number of students chosen by gender. For example, three boys chose two boys each

as friends, and six boys chose two girls each as friends. Boys were more likely to circle more than two names of the opposite gender than were girls. One boy chose three girls, two boys chose four girls each, and one boy chose five girls as friends. Fourteen girls in the class identified two boys each as friends, the minimum number required. Only one girl in the class circled more than two boys' names, as shown in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4: Distribution by Gender of the Frequency of the number of students chosen as "Friends" in P6

P6	# of names circled by each student						
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Frequency of boys circling boys' names	3	2	3	1	1	0	0
Frequency of boys circling girls' names	6	1	2	1	0	0	0
Frequency of girls circling boys' names	14	0	0	1	0	0	0
Frequency of girls circling girls' names	3	4	2	1	1	3	1

In summary, the boys in P6 were more likely to choose more than the minimum number of students of the opposite gender as "friends" than were the girls of P6. Only one girl in P6 chose more than the minimum number of boys as "friends."

The sociometric data regarding social status looked a little different for the P7 class group. In P7, the fewest names any student circled as "friends" was two, two girls' names and zero boys' names, chosen by a girl. The highest number of names

circled as friends in P7 was fourteen, six girls' names and eight boys' names, chosen by a boy. The average number of students chosen as friends in P7 was 8.17. This is a higher average number of students chosen as friends than in the P6 class. The boys in P7 chose an average of 3.0 girls as friends and an average of 4.64 boys as friends. The girls in P7 chose an average of 6.08 girls as friends and an average of 2.5 boys as friends, as shown in Table 5.5. Overall, both boys and girls in the P7 class group chose an average of two more classmates as "friends" than did the students in P6.

Table 5.5: Average number of classmates chosen as "Friends" by students in P7

P7	Avg. # girls chosen	Avg. # boys chosen	Overall Average
Chosen by boys	3	4.64	7.72
Chosen by girls	6.08	2.5	8.58
		Overall by Class	8.17

Next, I distributed the frequency of the number of students chosen each time in P7 by gender. Surprisingly, one girl in P7 chose zero boys as friends, even though students were prompted to choose at least two boys and two girls. Seven girls in P7 chose two boys each as friends, one girl chose three boys as friends, one girl chose four boys, and one girl chose five boys as friends. The complete set of frequency data for P7 is shown in Table 5.6.

Table 5.6: Distribution by Gender of the Frequency of the number of students chosen as "Friends" in P7

P7	# of names circled by each student							
	0	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Frequency of boys circling boys' names	0	2	3	1	0	2	2	1
Frequency of boys circling girls' names	0	6	2	1	1	1	0	0
Frequency of girls circling boys' names	1	7	1	2	1	0	0	0
Frequency of girls circling girls' names	0	1	1	0	2	3	0	5

In summary, the boys in P7 and the boys in P6 were equally likely to choose more than two girls as friends. However, even with the exception of the girl in P7 who chose no boys as friends, the girls in P7 were more likely than the girls in P6 to choose more than two boys as friends. Overall, students in P7 chose more students as friends than did students in P6.

The second part of the sociometric device, titled Part II: Best at Subjects, was used to determine the academic status of students on the Spartans team.

In P6, the average number of students chosen as "best at subjects" was 6.52, similar to the average number of students chosen as "friends" (6.48), as shown on Table 5.7. I was curious to see if students had circled all of their friends again for "best at subjects," so I looked back through the original individual student sociograms. Although most students did circle a few of their friends in the "best at subjects" section, most students also circled different students. A few students circled a completely different group of students.

Table 5.7: P6 Average number of students chosen as "Best at Subjects"

P6	Avg. # girls chosen	Avg. # boys chosen	Overall Average
Chosen by boys	2.7	2.78	5.7
Chosen by girls	4.25	2.8	7.05
		Overall average by class	6.52

I determined the frequency with which the students in P6 each chose two, three, four, or more students as "best at subjects." The distribution of the frequency of students chosen for "best at subjects" was similar to the frequency of students chosen as "friends." The girls in P6, however, were more likely to choose more than two boys as "best at subjects" than they were to choose more than two boys as friends. One girl in P6 chose eight boys as "best at subjects," two girls chose four boys each, two girls chose three boys each, and ten girls chose two boys each as "best at subjects." When choosing classmates who were "best at subjects," the girls in P6 appeared more likely to see boys as good at subjects than as friends. The boys in P6 appeared equally likely to see girls as friends and as good at subjects. Six boys chose two girls each as "friends" and as "best at subjects," and four boys chose more than two girls each as "friends" and as "best at subjects," as shown in the full set of P6 "best at subjects" frequency data in Table 5.8.

In P7, students generally chose fewer classmates as "best at subjects" than they did as friends. For example, the girls in P7 chose an average of 6.08 girls each as friends, but they only chose 4.67 girls each as "best at subjects." Similarly, the

boys in P7 chose 4.64 boys each as friends, but they only chose 2.5 boys each as "best at subjects," as shown in Table 5.9.

Table 5.8: Distribution by Gender of the Frequency of the number of students chosen as "Best at Subjects" in P6

P6	# of names circled by each student									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Frequency of boys circling boys' names	0	3	2	3	1	1	0	0	0	0
Frequency of boys circling girls' names	0	6	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
Frequency of girls circling boys' names	0	10	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	0
Frequency of girls circling girls' names	1	5	2	0	3	2	0	0	0	2

Table 5.9: P7 Average number of students chosen as "Best at Subjects"

P7	Avg. # girls chosen	Avg. # boys chosen	Overall Average
Chosen by boys	2.5	2.5	5
Chosen by girls	4.67	2.58	7.25
		Overall by Class	6.23

I determined the frequency with which the students in P7 each chose two, three, four, or more students as "best at subjects." When compared with the data from "friends," students in P7 were less likely to choose large numbers of students as "best at subjects." Some boys circled six, seven, or eight boys' names as "friends,"

but no boy circled more than five boys' names as "best at subjects." One boy only chose one girl as "best at subjects," even though the prompt asked for a minimum of two names for each gender. Six boys chose two girls each, one boy chose four girls, and one boy chose five girls as "best at subjects." One boy in P7, Jonathan—the boy who had extreme anxiety and difficulty making decisions—refused to complete this part of the sociogram. He had no difficulty circling the names of the students in the class he considered friends, but when asked to choose students who were "best at subjects" he gave up, exclaiming, "I can't possibly do this because I have no way of knowing!"

The girls in P7 were also less likely to choose large numbers of girls as "best at subjects" as they were for "friends." For example, five girls chose eight girls each as friends, but only one girl chose a high number of girls, nine, as "best at subjects," as shown in Table 5.10. The girls in P7 did not choose many boys as "best at subjects." Seven girls chose two boys each, three girls chose three boys each, and two girls chose four boys each as "best at subjects." In both class groups, the girls in P6 and P7 did not appear to see boys as generally better than girls at academics; this is particularly clear in the P6 class group, with ten out of fifteen girls choosing the minimum number of boys for "best at subjects." Similarly, the boys in both class groups did not appear to see girls as better at academics than boys. In summary, there appeared to be little gender bias related to academics in either class group. The students in the P7 class, however, were less likely overall to see their classmates as good at academics as they were to see their classmates as friends.

Table 5.10: Distribution by Gender of the Frequency of the number of students chosen as "Best at Subjects" in P7

	# of names circled by each student								
	0	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Frequency of boys circling boys' names	1	7	2	0	1	0	0	0	0
Frequency of boys circling girls' names	1	8	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Frequency of girls circling boys' names		7	3	2	0	0	0	0	0
Frequency of girls circling girls' names		2	2	3	1	1	2	0	1

Spartans' Peer Status Rankings

As described in Chapter 3, to determine each student's peer status rank from the sociometric data collected, I followed the method used by Cohen and Lotan (1997) of tallying up the number of times each student in the class was chosen by a classmate as a "friend" for social status and as "best at subjects" for academic status. Then I created a class distribution of the tallies and assigned each child a status rank ranging from 1 to 5, depending on the fifth of the distribution with that tally number for that child's name. To make this ranking method a bit more clear, the results for academic status rankings for the P6 class group are shown again in Table 5.11.

Each student's actual social status rank was based on the quintile into which his tally score fell. These quintile ranks could now be read as "1" for the lowest status students or "3" for middle status students, and so forth. In the P6 Fall Social Status Rankings shown in Table 21, one student in the class, Hunter, had a tally score

Table 5.11: P6 Fall Social Status Rankings

P6 Social Status Quintile Ranks (*IEP)									
1 (Low Status)		2		3		4		5 (High Status)	
[1]0, 1, 2, 2, 2		3, 3, 4, 4		6, 6, 6, 6		7, 7, 7, 8, 8, 9		10, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15	
Hunter	0	Zoe	3	*John	6	Jacob	7	Morgan	10
*Lynn	1	Jeremy	3	Paige	6	Jennifer	7	Michelle	10
Haley	2	Sean	4	*Evan	6	Jade	7	Logan	11
*Rebecca	2	Sara	4	Kimberly	6	Faith	8	Jasmine	13
Carlos	2					Leah	8	Robert	14
						Natalia	9	Owen	15

of zero, meaning that Hunter was not chosen by even one student as a "friend." Owen, on the other hand, was chosen as a "friend" by fifteen of his classmates. Of the students in P6 with IEPs, two students fell into the lowest social status quintile rank, and two students fell into the middle status quintile rank. Boys in P6 were distributed evenly between the status ranks, with four boys in the two lowest status groups, two in the middle status group, and four boys in the two highest status groups. Girls were more likely to be in the two higher social status groups in P6, with eight girls falling into the two highest groups, two girls falling in the middle group, and five girls falling into the two lowest social status ranks.

When the tally scores were distributed for academic status or "best at subjects" in P6, many students moved up or down in status rank compared to their social status. For example, Evan moved from an average social status rank of 3 to the

[1] Number of tallies per student

highest rank, 5, for academic status. The other three students with IEPs in the class, however, either fell in status as compared to social status, or had the same low status rank for both academic and social status. The girls in P6 were more evenly distributed across the status ranks for academic status than they were for social status; six girls were in the two lowest academic status ranks, two girls were in the average rank, and seven girls were in the two highest academic status ranks, as shown in Table 5.12.

Table 5.12: P6 Fall Academic Status Rankings

P6 Academic Status Quintile Ranks (*IEP)									
1		2		3		4		5	
1, 1, 1, 2, 2, 2		3, 3, 3, 3		4, 5, 5, 6		7, 8, 9, 9, 10		11, 11, 11, 16, 17, 17	
Haley	1	*John	3	Jeremy	4	Jasmine	7	Morgan	11
*Rebecca	1	Sara	3	Leah	5	Kimberly	8	Michelle	11
Hunter	1	Sean	3	Jennifer	5	Faith	9	Logan	11
*Lynn	2	Jade	3	Jacob	6	Robert	9	Owen	16
Carlos	2					Paige	10	*Evan	17
Natalia	2							Zoe	17

As explained by Cohen and Lotan (1997), when the academic status and social status ranks are combined, the result is an "overall status rank" for each student. At times it may be helpful to look at a student's social status rank or academic status rank in isolation, but it is also sometimes useful to see a child's overall peer status rank. Again I followed Cohen and Lotan's (1997) method to find overall peer status ranks: I combined the academic and social ranks for each student,

and then ordered the combined scores in a new distribution and evenly divided them into groups of five as best as possible. In P6, fewer students were in the highest two overall status ranks (8) than were in the lowest two overall status ranks (11). Six students in P6 had a middle status rank for overall peer status, shown in Table 5.13.

Table 5.13: P6 Overall Fall Peer Status Rankings

P6 Overall Peer Status Ranks (*IEP) (based on the sum of Social Status & Academic Status ranks)									
1		2		3		4		5	
1, 2, 2, 2, 2		3, 4, 4, 5, 5, 6		7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7		8, 8, 9, 9		10, 10, 10, 10	
Hunter	1	Jeremy	3	Jacob	7	Faith	8	Morgan	10
*Lynn	2	Sean	4	Jennifer	7	*Evan	8	Michelle	10
Haley	2	Sara	4	Kimberly	7	Jasmine	9	Owen	10
*Rebecca	2	Natalia	5	Leah	7	Robert	9	Logan	10
Carlos	2	*John	5	Zoe	7				
		Jade	6	Paige	7				

The sociometric data for P7 looked different than the data for P6. For social status, more students in P7 were in the two highest social status ranks than in the two lowest social status ranks, as shown in Table 5.14. Only three students in P7 were in the lowest social status rank and four were in the second lowest social rank. Overall, seven students were in the two lowest social ranks, six were in the average status rank, and ten students were in the top two status ranks, creating a sharp divide in the class between the large number of students who were “popular” and the small group of students who had very low social status.

Table 5.14: P7 Fall Social Status Rankings

P7 Social Status Quintile Ranks (*IEP)									
1		2		3		4		5	
1, 3, 4		5, 5, 5, 5		6, 6, 7, 7, 8, 8		9, 9, 10, 11, 11		12, 13, 13, 15, 18	
*Jonathan	1	*Grace	5	Chris	6	Sophie	9	Jessica	12
*Kayla	3	*Tony	5	Haani	6	Alyssa	9	Joshua	13
Rachel	4	*Nick	5	Olivia	7	Hannah	10	Brianna	13
		Mia	5	Kevin	7	*Dylan	11	Ben	15
				Ethan	8	Madison	11	Ava	18
				Will	8				

Similar to the shifts in status seen in the P6 group, students in P7 shifted up or down in status rank when ranked by academic status as compared to social status. For example, Mia, who was in the second lowest social status rank in Table 24, was in the highest academic status rank, as shown in Table 5.15. Ava and Joshua, who were each in the highest social status group, were in the second highest academic status group. When looking at academic status results for P7, four students were in the lowest status rank and five were in the second lowest status rank. P7 had a more

Table 5.15: P7 Fall Academic Status Rankings

P7 Academic Status Quintile Ranks (*IEP)									
1		2		3		4		5	
0, 1, 1, 1		2, 2, 2, 2, 2		3, 3, 4, 5, 5		7, 8, 11, 11		12, 13, 13, 15, 15	
Rachel	0	*Grace	2	*Tony	3	Olivia	7	Ethan	12
Chris	1	*Jonathan	2	Will	3	Brianna	8	Mia	13
*Nick	1	Joshua	2	Madison	4	Hannah	11	Alyssa	13
*Kayla	1	*Dylan	2	Jessica	5	Ava	11	Haani	15
		Kevin	2	Sophie	5			Ben	15

even distribution of students between academic ranks than it had between social status ranks.

When combining P7 social status rankings and academic status rankings to get an overall status rank for each student, I found that more students in P7 had high overall status than low overall status. Twelve students were in the two highest status ranks, but only seven students were in the two lowest overall status ranks. Some students like Dylan had relatively low academic status (2) and relatively high social status (4). This suggests that although Dylan was not regarded by his peers as "good at" ELA or social studies, he was socially popular. Dylan had an overall status rank of 3, as shown in Table 5.16.

Table 5.16: P7 Overall Fall Peer Status Rankings

P7 Overall Peer Status Ranks (based on the sum of Social Status & Academic Status ranks; *IEP)									
1		2		3		4		5	
1, 2, 3, 3		4, 4, 4		5, 6, 6, 6		7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 8, 8		9, 9, 9, 9, 10	
Rachel	1	Chris	4	*Tony	5	Sophie	7	Alyssa	9
*Kayla	2	*Grace	4	*Dylan	6	Ethan	7	Ava	9
*Jonathan	3	Kevin	4	Will	6	Joshua	7	Brianna	9
*Nick	3			Olivia	6	Mia	7	Hannah	9
						Madison	7	Ben	10
						Jessica	8		
						Haani	8		

When comparing overall status rankings between the two class groups, I found that twelve students were in the two highest ranks in P7, whereas only eight students were in the two highest ranks in P6. In the P6 class group, the largest

number of students falls within the second and third quintile ranks, suggesting that the majority of the class had "average" peer status. In the P7 class group, however, the largest number of students falls within the two highest quintile ranks. Just over half the class (twelve students) has high status, four students have average status, and a small group (seven students) has low status in the class. This suggests that in the P7 class group there is a sharp divide between high status and low status social groups, where most of the class appears to be "popular" and a small group of students appear to be "unpopular" in the class.

Another difference in the status rankings between the two class groups is the overall status of the girls and boys in the two classes. In P6, there is an even distribution of boys and girls across the status ranks, relative to the numbers of boys (10) and girls (15) in the class. In P7, eight girls are in the two highest overall status ranks compared to only four boys in the highest status ranks. With twice as many girls than boys in the highest status ranks, the girls in P7 appear to have higher status than the boys, given the relatively even number of boys (11) and girls (12) in the class.

Teacher Generated Sociometric Data

A final source for peer status data was the Teacher-Generated Sociometric instrument, as described in Chapter 3. I created this sociometric device after reading about the peer status information that Cynthia Lewis (2001) collected during her study in a fifth/sixth grade classroom. Lewis collected data regarding the socio-economic status, friendship groups, and academic achievement of each focal student of her study from the classroom teacher, the principal, and from the students' parents.

I used Lewis' data categories to create a rubric that a teacher could use to determine one measure of a child's overall peer status. The teacher-generated sociometric rubric is shown in Table 5.17.

Using this rubric, I circled the box in each category that best described each child's situation or behavior, and then added up the values of each box to come to a total peer status score for each student. The highest possible overall score on this rubric is an 8. After I scored each of the students on the Spartans team using this rubric, I divided up the distribution of scores for each class into quintiles to determine each student's peer status rank. The results of the teacher-generated sociometric data for each class group are found in Tables 5.18 and 5.19.

Table 5.17: Rubric Used to Score the Teacher-Generated Sociometric Data

	1	2	3
SES	• Free and Reduced Lunch	• Not Free and Reduced Lunch	
Academic Status	• Rarely participates in whole or small group activities • Low Grade Point Avg • Struggles with math • Struggles with reading	• Sometimes participates in whole group or small group activities • Average Grades • Average math skills • Average reading skills	• Frequent participation in whole group and small group activities • High Grade Point Avg • High math skills • High reading skills
Social Status	• Sits alone or with few others at lunch • Chooses to work alone • Sits off to side during "down time" • May not be invited to join groups • Doesn't attempt to join groups, or is rebuffed • Is seen socializing with few other students	• Has a regular lunch group • Works alone or with others • Has a core group of students s/he usually sits with or chooses to work with, if given a choice • Is observed socializing with a core group of students	• Has a regular lunch group (may be a very big group) • Rarely chooses to work alone • Has a large number of students s/he chooses to work with • Most other students seem to want to be part of his/her group • Is observed socializing with a large group of students; appears to be liked by everyone

Table 5.18: P6 Teacher-Generated Peer Status Rankings

P6 Overall Scores from the Teacher-Generated Rubric				
1	2	3	4	5
4, 4	5, 5, 5, 5	6, 6, 6, 6, 6, 6	7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7	8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8
Hunter Lynn	John Carlos Rebecca	Jacob Haley Evan Kimberly Leah	Morgan Natalia Paige Sean Jade Zoe Jeremy	Jasmine Logan Jennifer Robert Michelle Faith Owen

Table 5.19: P7 Teacher-Generated Peer Status Rankings

P7 Overall Scores from the Teacher-Generated Rubric				
1	2	3	4	5
4, 4, 4	5, 5	6, 6, 6, 6, 6	7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7	8, 8, 8, 8, 8
Kayla Tony Rachel	Nick Jonathan	Chris Will Dylan Grace Mia	Kevin Haani Madison Olivia Joshua Ethan Sophie Jessica	Hannah Ava Alyssa Brianna Ben

For both classes, it is immediately apparent that the distribution of students across the five status ranks is not even. In both P6 and P7, the majority of students are ranked in the middle or highest status ranks. Socio-economic status as one part of the teacher-generated sociometric may be one factor to account for this skewed distribution. The socio-economic score was based only on whether a child had

reduced rate lunch or not. Only a handful of students on the Spartans team had reduced rate lunch, so most students on the team scored a 2 for SES on the rubric. In addition, as Cohen and Lotan (1997) point out, "perceived academic ability" may have greater impact on a students' academic status than his or her actual academic ability when judged by his or her peers (p. 66). The teacher-generated sociometric, however, used actual achievement data to determine academic score, and many students, such as Rachel, were performing at a higher level academically than given credit for by peers. Data provided by the teacher-generated sociometric, however, helps to validate student-generated peer status results.

The Focus Group

The Criteria Used for Choosing the Focal Students

I wanted to select a small group of students on which to focus in order to look closely at possible peer status effects on the function of small groups in my classroom. Three main criteria emerged over the course of the study for choosing the focal students: the student's peer status, the student's level of participation in a small group, and the type of participation the student exhibited during small group activities. One final consideration in the selection process was making sure I had both boys and girls in the focus group.

The first criterion, a student's overall peer status, was chosen to explore the possible impact of peer status on the function of small groups. In order to discover what types of status effects, if any, were taking place during small group activities, I needed students with high, middle, and low status rankings in the focus group.

The second criterion, a student's level of participation in small groups, emerged when I was doing a preliminary analysis of data as it was collected during the school year. Data collected during small group observations and from group recordings revealed that students were not all participating a similar amount in the groups. Using the preliminary data, I created a list of possible focal students by choosing students who were participating in varying degrees in small groups. For example, some students had very high levels of participation, regardless of the group composition, and other students had average or low levels of participation, some almost to the point of non-participation. Some students had variable levels of participation, possibly due to the composition of the group or the group facilitator. Once I had a preliminary list of focal students, I chose which small groups to collect recordings from based on which groups had one of the possible focal students in them that day. The methods I used to determine a student's level of participation (a student's participation rate) will be discussed more fully in Chapter 6.

The third criterion for selecting the focal students came from the types of participation students were exhibiting during small group activities. During the analysis of the transcripts I began to see certain participation patterns emerging from the data, participation patterns that may help to explain the ways in which small groups were functioning in my classes. For example, some students were exhibiting participation skills that were indicators of a successful group, with "successful" being defined here as productive to the task, involving equitable participation, and having evidence of high-level thinking. One participation pattern indicative of a successful group appeared to be strong facilitation. Some students, on the other hand, were

exhibiting participation patterns that were indicators of unsuccessful groups. Some patterns indicative of unsuccessful groups included frequent interrupting, off task activities, and lack of equitable participation. I categorized these participation patterns into five main categories: facilitating, silent, dependent, contributing, and distracting patterns of participation. Each of these participation patterns and my analysis of their possible effects on small group success are fully discussed in Chapter 6.

The Focal Students

I used the criteria described above to select the focal students of this study. Although my original goal was a small focus group of six to eight students, I ended up with fifteen focal students for two reasons. First, each student illustrates an important concept about one of the five patterns of participation that emerged from the data. Second, in order to have a mix of social and academic status ranks across the five patterns of participation, and in order to have a mix of boys and girls, I needed more than five or six students in the focus group.

I grouped the focal students into five sub-groups according to the pattern of participation each student best represented. Instead of fifteen separate student profiles, I will describe each student as part of a profile group. The rich variety provided by a sample size of fifteen focal students may allow for a deeper understanding of small group interactions among middle school students. Table 5.20 provides an overview of the fifteen focal students and how they were grouped in the five participation patterns discussed in the next section.

Table 5.20: The Focal Students in groups by Participation Patterns

Facilitating	Contributing	Dependent	Silent	Distracting
Ava Dylan Robert Jasmine	Leah Jacob Nick	John Hunter Will	Kayla Grace Ethan	Sean Chris

Meet the Facilitators

As described in more depth in Chapter 6, facilitating actions included monitoring group interactions and inviting others to participate, keeping a group moving forward on a task, bringing off-task group members back to task, and pushing discussions into higher levels of thinking. There are four students in the focus group who exhibited facilitating patterns of participation, two from P7 and two from P6, as shown in Table 5.21.

Table 5.21: Facilitator Profiles

Focal Students (*IEP)	**Class Group**	**Social Status Rank**	**Academic Status Rank**	**Overall Peer Status Rank**	**Average Academic Performance**	**Average Adjusted Participation Rate[2]**
Ava	P7	5	4	5	A	1.79
*Dylan	P7	4	2	3	B/C	1.07
Robert	P6	5	4	4	A/B	1.41
Jasmine	P6	5	4	4	A+	1.29

[2] Participation rate is a measure of a student's participation in a group in relation to the other members of the group. An adjusted participation rate is a measure that can be compared across groups of different sizes. Methods for determining a student's participation rates are discussed in Chapter 3.

Ava, the first representative in the facilitators group, was a straight A student in all academic areas. Ava quickly learned how to invite others to share, and she was a decent facilitator. In the P7 class group, Ava was well-liked by her peers and had a large friendship group. Ava had high overall peer status and other students respected her and listened to her when she asked them to get back on task, a quality of a good facilitator and something Ava was not afraid to do. Ava talked a lot in groups, however, often being the most talkative during discussions, as suggested by her high participation rate shown in Table 5.21 (participation rates are discussed in depth in Chapter 3). Although she was good at keeping track of group members' participation, Ava often spoke first or second and at great length about each new topic before she invited others to share. By the time she gave other students a turn, Ava had already "taken" all of their ideas and they had little left to offer.

Although most of the good facilitators in this study were also successful students, being a good student did not necessarily mean a child would be a good facilitator. Dylan from the P7 class group, for example, did not find school to be easy and was a reluctant student at best, yet he was a terrific facilitator. Dylan had an IEP and was on a football team. He was well-liked and social when in small groups, but he did not offer many content-related ideas during small group discussions. He quickly became distracted or bored during small group activities. When Dylan was the facilitator, however, he participated successfully and helped his group be successful. When needed, his peers respected his suggestion to get back on task. When Dylan was the facilitator, he was capable of negotiating a group discussion, kept track of participation, and chose to offer his own point of view more than he ever

did when not facilitating. Dylan was good at inviting students who were not getting a chance to share and even helped push some of his groupmates into high-level, exploratory thinking.

Jasmine and Robert, from the P6 class group, were both strong facilitators. They were well-respected by their peers. Similar to Ava, Jasmine and Robert had high overall peer status and were strong students. Neither one of them hesitated to bring a fellow student back on task or seek out teacher support, if needed. Jasmine and Robert were not only able to keep tabs on group dynamics and group member participation, but they also had the added ability to push their groupmates' thinking to higher-levels. The two biggest differences between these two students and Ava was their ability to let everyone else in a group speak before them, and their capability of asking follow-up questions that would push students into higher-level thinking.

For example, Jasmine asks a follow-up question that extends the discussion in the excerpt from Sara's Fever Group in Table 5.22. The group is discussing the novel Fever, 1793 by Laurie Halse Anderson. Zoe brings up a question about what happened to one of the characters in the story, Jacob, the father of twin boys who survived the yellow fever epidemic. The discussion about Jacob might have ended at turn 347 when Zoe says, "But I don't know what happened," but Jasmine steps in and asks a question following up on a point Zoe had just made about the twins. As a result, the girls continue their discussion about Jacob for another fifteen turns and think critically about the end of the story. Inviting skills and skills in asking follow-up questions, like Zoe does in this example, were emphasized in discussion skill

mini-lessons over the course of the year, but were skills that Ava still had not developed by June.

Table 5.22: Excerpt 1 from Sara's Fever Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech** Short pause noted: … Transcriptionist note: (making odd sounds) Interrupted speech: bel- Overlapping speech: /cat/
339	Zoe	1	Okay, well I was kind of confused on what happened to Joseph
		2	Be/cause/ he wasn't in the ending of the book
340	Haley	1	/yeah/
341	Zoe	1	And he wasn't in the epilogue either
		2	So I'm not really sure what happened to him
		3	Did he die or something?
342	Haley	1	No, he's alive
343	Jasmine	1	I think he's just not very important to the story
		2	So they didn't put him in the end
344	Zoe	1	I know, but the twins were in the end
345	Jasmine	1	yeah
346	Haley	1	Oh, yeah
347	Zoe	1	But I don't know what happened
348	Jasmine	1	Yeah, why wouldn't the twins go back with their dad?

Meet the Contributors

Students in the contributor group were students who demonstrated high-level discussion skills, such as inviting others to share, making personal connections, and extending ideas to further build and develop a discussion. Another quality of contributors was their ability to participate equitably in a discussion. Most contributors had participation rates close to the proportional rate of 1.00. There are

three contributors in the focus group, two from P6 and one from P7, as shown in the Contributor Profiles chart in Table 5.23.

Table 5.23: Contributor Profiles

Focal Students (*IEP)	**Class Group**	**Social Status Rank**	**Academic Status Rank**	**Overall Peer Status Rank**	**Average Academic Performance**	**Average Adjusted Participation Rate**
Leah	P6	4	3	3	B/C	.92
Jacob	P6	4	3	3	A	.72
*Nick	P7	2	1	1	B/C	.95

Leah, the first focal student in the contributors group, worked cheerfully with any of the girls or boys in the class (with the exception of Hunter), and everyone in the class seemed to like Leah. In general, school was not Leah's favorite thing; she put in an average amount of effort and achieved average grades. But Leah had a great sense of humor and always worked hard on group projects. Leah was a terrific contributor in small groups. Over the course of the school year she picked up many of the discussion skills practiced during mini-lessons. She rarely interrupted others, and she had lots to offer when she had the floor. Similar to other students who exhibited contributing participation patterns, Leah did not need to be invited to share but would find her own openings in the discussion, and it was extremely rare for her to get off task.

Jacob also exhibited contributing participation patterns, but he was quite different from Leah. Up until third grade, Jacob had been a selective mute. He was extremely shy, especially in the beginning of the year, and for him to have ended the

year as one of the stronger contributors in small groups was a real accomplishment for him. Like Leah, Jacob absorbed the mini-lessons on discussion skills and could be seen practicing them and becoming more comfortable with these skills over the course of the year. Jacob ended the year with the ability to invite others to share, he knew the techniques to use to help a group get back on task, he could build on other people's ideas to expand discussions, and he could find his own opportunities to get the floor.

In the excerpt from Owen's Lucas Group in Table 5.24, for example, Jacob gets the floor on his own two times and also invites Owen, the facilitator in the group, to share. The group is discussing the novel The Apprenticeship of Lucas Whitaker, by Cynthia DeFelice. In this section of transcript, the boys are discussing how doctors in the 1840s handled children in a time without anesthesia. Here the boys are talking about the doctor doing the job of a dentist and pulling teeth.

Table 5.24: Excerpt 1 from Owen's Lucas Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
113	Evan	1	The doc, the Doc didn't really do that good of a job
		2	He said I'm just gonna strap you down and bleed you
114	Jacob	1	Because it's early, it's like not…
115	Evan	1	But that's not something you tell a seven year old
116	Jacob	1	But it's not like the modern day medical that we have now
117	Robert	1	Yeah, they usually put you to sleep (students laughing)
118	Evan	1	Well, I don't know how
		2	But they did it once
		3	They did it with the big guy
119	Owen	1	I know
120	Jacob	1	Alright, Owen, you want to share yours, now?
121	Owen	1	Um, yeah, thank you Jacob

Like Leah, in groups Jacob was always focused on the topic of discussion, looking for ways to contribute. He was tuned in to the dynamics of the group and often invited someone to share. Jacob never caused a group to get off task or lose focus. For the most part, any group that had Jacob in it had a successful group session.

The final focal student who exemplified contributing behaviors was Nick. Nick was in P7 and had an IEP. He played on the football team with many of the boys in P7. With the possible exception of Kayla, Nick was the most challenged learner on the Spartans team during the year of this study. He had slow processing speed in terms of his ability to take in new information or communicate his ideas, and he was reading at a 3rd grade level, but Nick was a hard worker. Even with his struggles and the enormous amount of time and effort it took him to earn C's, Nick maintained a positive attitude. At the beginning of the school year Nick did not say much during small groups, but by April, Nick was easily finding opportunities to get the floor, adding on to other people's ideas and helping to build and develop the conversation. Like other contributors in the class, some of Nick's comments helped propel his groups into high-level, exploratory discussions.

Meet the Dependents

Students exhibiting a pattern of dependent participation had a lot in common with students who exhibited a pattern of contributing participation. Students with participation patterns categorized as "dependent" were able to add valuable comments to a discussion, could find their own opportunities to get the floor, and could even invite others to share. The difference between students who were dependents and those who were contributors came down to their ability to be <u>consistently</u> engaged in

the small group task. Students who exhibited dependent participation patterns literally were dependent on a strong facilitator to keep them actively engaged in the discussion. Although they usually had high participation rates, students with dependent participation patterns often spent part of their discussion time off topic. "Dependents" needed a facilitator they respected, who was well-organized, calm, aware of the group interactions, and who could bring "dependents" back to topic as needed. Three focal students were in the dependents group, two from P6 and one from P7, as shown in Table 5.25.

Table 35: Profiles of the Dependents

Focal Students (*IEP)	**Class Group**	**Social Status Rank**	**Academic Status Rank**	**Overall Peer Status Rank**	**Average Academic Performance**	**Average Adjusted Participation Rate**
*John	P6	3	2	2	C/D	.90
Hunter	P6	1	1	1	A/B	.83
Will	P7	3	3	3	A	1.20

One of the students exhibiting dependent participation patterns was John, a friendly boy in P6. Although John had an IEP for learning challenges in math, writing, and reading, he was a bright young man with an interesting personality. He absolutely loved anything to do with history and war. John's participation was characterized as "dependent" because he was willing and able to be a full participant in a small group discussion, but only if he was actively included by other members of the group. When John was with a strong facilitator and in a group with strong contributors, he was invited to share early and often, making a big difference in his

overall participation in the discussion; he became a strong contributor and offered many excellent ideas for the group discussion.

When John was with a weak facilitator, however, and when he was not invited to share much, if at all, he tended to make jokes or started a running side-line commentary instead of directly participating in the group. John's body language was another possible factor in his difficulty to participate fully. He did not often use direct eye contact with any but his closest peers, and he had a habit of sitting himself slightly behind and/or to the side of the group, which only a strong facilitator would notice or help to change. Overall, the quality of John's contributions to a group was highly dependent on the facilitator and other members of the group.

Another student who exhibited dependent patterns of participation was Hunter. Hunter came from a difficult home life, with both parents struggling with alcoholism. Hunter's parents fought constantly, even though divorced, and each of them had taken restraining orders out on the other in recent years. Hunter and his mother were temporarily living in her boyfriend's apartment, and Hunter did not really have a place he called "home." Possibly because he was unable to get positive attention from his parents, Hunter sought attention from his peers, but he always seemed to go about it in the wrong way. Hunter relentlessly teased his classmates and was excessively silly. At one point in the year, he was stalking a few of the girls in class via text messaging and phone calls (and was reported to the principal and the police). Added to Hunter's social difficulties were an uncontrollable facial tic and a "twitching" syndrome that became more apparent when Hunter was doing oral

presentations in front of a large group. This twitching syndrome also made Hunter's handwriting almost impossible to read; he did the majority of his work on a computer.

Hunter's social status was the lowest in the class. Out of his twenty-four classmates, no one circled Hunter's name on the "friends" part of the student-generated sociometric, and the only student who gave Hunter credit for academic ability in the "best at subjects" part of the sociometric was Owen, the kindest boy I have ever met. Hunter's emotional and social difficulties notwithstanding, he was an extremely intelligent young man. Hunter turned out to be a terrific contributing member in small groups, as long as he was with a strong facilitator and a group of strong contributors. With strong facilitators like Robert or Jasmine who could keep a group organized and on task, Hunter had many opportunities to let his intelligence shine. He was capable of high-level comments, could ask follow-up questions of his peers, and could attend to the interactions of the group and invite members who had not yet been given a chance to share. Hunter even adopted some of Robert's and Owen's skills of complimenting his groupmates at appropriate times.

Hunter's participation pattern was classified as dependent, however, because he did not have the self-control necessary to keep himself focused and engaged. If the group had a weak facilitator, Hunter would fall back into his annoying, attention-getting behaviors and would be heard laughing in a high-pitched, loud giggle from across the room. Without a strong facilitator, these behaviors could quickly frustrate his groupmates, dissolving a group into argument and chaos. Hunter's success in small groups was completely dependent on a strong facilitator and other strong contributors.

The final focal student who typified a dependent pattern of participation was Will. Will was a student in P7 and he was quite a fun young man. He had a great sense of humor and was very bright. Will was one of the boys in P7 who played football and loved to read fantasy books. One of his closest friends was Jonathan, the boy with extreme anxiety issues mentioned in Chapter 4. Together, Will and Jonathan would talk about things like aliens, Harry Potter, and other fantasy series like the Percy Jackson and the Olympians books by Rick Riordan. Will and his friends also liked to draw dragons and other mythical creatures.

Will's biggest challenge at school was controlling his attention and impulsivity. Like John, Will had a great deal to offer to a group discussion, but if the group was not facilitated by someone who was organized, calm, and able to read the interactions of the group, then Will was at risk of losing the thread of the conversation and going off on his own tangents. Similar to John, Will had side conversations with himself if no one else was listening. When Will was in a group with Dylan or with another strong facilitator, however, he was a strong contributor, and could develop an idea in a way that would push a group into high-level thinking.

Meet the Silent

The fourth group of focal students is made up of students who exhibited a participation pattern I categorized as "silent." Silent participants may be provided opportunities to share by facilitators, but they may not end up contributing anything of substance. "Silent" students may say "Yeah" fifteen times in a group discussion, but may not actually offer a single opinion or idea. Sometimes, if the group does not have a strong facilitator, silent students may not speak at all; they have very low

participation rates. "Silent" students can be students of all status levels, social groups, or academic abilities. There are three "silent" students in the focus group, two girls and one boy, all from P7.

Table 5.26: Profiles of the "Silent"

Focal Students (*IEP)	**Class Group**	**Social Status Rank**	**Academic Status Rank**	**Overall Peer Status Rank**	**Average Academic Performance**	**Average Adjusted Participation Rate**
*Kayla	P7	1	1	1	C	.54
*Grace	P7	2	2	2	B/C	.47
Ethan	P7	3	5	4	A	.42

One of the students exhibiting silent participation patterns was Kayla. Kayla was on the Autism spectrum and had an IEP for academic and social-emotional reasons. Kayla had at least one stuffed animal with her all the time and was constantly drawing puppy dogs on all her papers. These behaviors set her apart from her sixth grade peers. Besides the obvious social differences made visible by the stuffed animals, Kayla also had difficulty "reading" a conversation, as is common with people on the Autism spectrum. Sometimes Kayla would be listening actively and would be trying to participate, but she would just not "get it." When asked a question, she would sometimes just stare at length at the questioner. As adults, we understand that Kayla was attempting to process what was being said, to "read" the tone of voice and facial expression, but as eleven and twelve-year old children, most of her sixth-grade classmates did not know how to handle Kayla's silence. They

simply stopped trying to involve Kayla in the group discussion, and she truly became "silent."

With the extensive time in class spent on inviting skills and the purpose and importance of silence, some of the better facilitators would attempt to bring Kayla back into the conversation, but more often than not Kayla's response would be "I don't know," or she would just stare at them. Most of her classmates did not know how to respond except by moving on to the next person. Mia, Kayla's friend from Madison Elementary School, was good at helping Kayla express an idea. Mia was a highly-sophisticated thinker and learner, and she had figured out that Kayla benefited from a series of short, concrete questions, rather than asking open-ended opinion questions. Unless Kayla was with Mia or another strong facilitator, she appear to be virtually ignored by her group mates. With no social skills at her disposal to use to break into a conversation, Kayla became a mute observer.

Another student who exhibited silent behaviors was Grace. Grace was far more socially adept than Kayla. Grace was on the fringe of the "popular" group of girls, and worked very hard to stay there. Grace's biggest fear was that she would be seen as "stupid" by her friends and would be ostracized from the group. This never happened, but it was a constant fear for her all year long, to the point that her mother requested that teachers not sit next to Grace to provide help in class because it was causing Grace extreme embarrassment; she arrived home in tears on more than one occasion. When in small groups, Grace would frequently say "yeah" in concert with other students in the group, but when invited to share she would rarely offer an idea of substance. Her body language suggested that she was unsure of herself, and she

may have been afraid of saying something at which the others would laugh. Grace appeared afraid of "losing face" in front of her peers even when she was with her closest friends in a small group. She appeared to prefer to sit silently and listen to the group talk.

The final focal student in the "silent" group is Ethan. Ethan is included in the focal group of students because he seems like an unlikely person to exhibit silent participation patterns during small groups. Ethan was one of the more popular boys in P7. Like Dylan, he was on the town's football league and the same lacrosse team as many other boys in P7. Unlike Dylan, Ethan was also very bright and a highly-successful student. Given his higher social status and ease with academics, it was a real puzzle to me as to why Ethan rarely spoke during small group activities. Whenever I would observe Ethan in his group, he was always attentive to the speaker, had a smile on his face (or at least his body language suggested he was comfortable and interested), and he appeared to be engaged and following along.

Ethan's fifth grade teacher had noted that he was "quiet," and I began to realize during the year that he was painfully shy. Even when with a small group of close friends, I noticed that Ethan was more of an observer than a vocal participant. The other boys appeared to enjoy being around Ethan – he was often sought out during lunch or other unstructured times, but even with friends Ethan's role appeared to be that of listener. Ethan's silence was noticed by his classmates once we began our mini-lessons on discussion skills. Students would invite Ethan to share many times during a conversation, but he would often choose to not enter the discussion by saying, "I don't know," or sticking to very simple phrases like "I agree."

I began to realize during some of the preliminary data analysis that Ethan, shy to begin with, was apparently completely tongue-tied when in a group of female classmates. When with at least one boy, Ethan was more likely to participate in the conversation.

In fact, although Ethan did not speak frequently, when he did share his ideas his turns were usually a little bit longer than the turns of the other students. For example, Ethan made a total of 124 utterances during the Tuck group discussion, a discussion group composed of two girls and two boys. When Ethan's total number of utterances was divided by his total number of turns, Ethan had an average of 1.6 utterances per turn. No other student in the group had as high a number of average utterances per turn. This means that, when he was in a mixed gender group, Ethan was more likely to explain his ideas when he did participate. But analysis of his participation when in a group of popular girls shows that Ethan became bright red and was rendered mute. In Chapter 6, I discuss Ethan's behaviors more fully and compare his participation when in groups of same or mixed genders.

Meet the Distracters

The last group of focal students is a group of students who exhibited participation patterns I described as "distracting." Distracting participation patterns were classified as having the types of actions that had the result of disrupting a group or bringing a group off task for sustained periods of time. As shown in Table 5.27, there were only two students with distracting participation patterns on the team, both boys. Few student facilitators appeared strong enough to help these students

Table 5.27: Profiles of Students with Distracting Participation Patterns

Focal Students	Class Group	Social Status Rank	Academic Status Rank	Overall Peer Status Rank	Average Academic Performance	Average Adjusted Participation Rate
Sean	P6	2	2	2	A/B	1.50
Chris	P7	3	1	2	C	.89

find success during small group activities. These two boys did not appear able to control their hyperactivity or their impulsivity. Groups with "distracters" as members rarely reached high-level thinking or discussion.

Even though they had similar patterns of participation in small groups, Sean and Chris were very different from each other. Sean was an amiable young man in P6 who was popular with his classmates. Sean had dozens of friends and was a skilled athlete. The girls on the team also considered Sean as handsome, and he was therefore the focus of many "crushes" during the year. Sean was always fun to be around. He had a strong work ethic; doing well in school was important to him and to his family. He had long-term goals of getting scholarships to several of the area's sports-oriented colleges and universities. Overall, Sean was a "great guy."

Yet Sean suffered from an extreme case of attention deficit disorder and his parents had chosen not to seek medication as a possible solution. Somehow, Sean managed to get himself through homework and independent work, but only if he was sitting alone and in a place with few distractions. Music really helped Sean get through a task, and he was smart enough to have picked up a variety of other compensating strategies over the years. Unfortunately, when working with other

students, Sean could not control his impulsivity as well as he could when he worked alone. As popular as he was, Sean's peers discovered that to be in a group with Sean was to be constantly distracted and off-task, frequently frustrated, and invariably less successful than expected, which probably accounted for Sean's lower peer status. Although having a strong facilitator helped Sean stay focused, his personality was so gregarious that he ended up off task over and over again. Sean's thoughts and ideas appeared to come spilling out of his mouth in a veritable flood, out of his control. His ideas came out so fast and with no clear order, that Sean often forgot what he was talking about, or whether he had shared an idea already. Sean's distracting participation patterns included a constant stream of chatter, singing, juggling or other forms of playing with a variety of objects, and other random acts. It would take a group to completely shut down and stop talking before Sean would become aware of his current activity, at which time he was always apologetic.

Similar to Sean, Chris's distracting behaviors could also shut down a group. But unlike Sean, Chris was not as popular in his class. Chris was daring, would often tease classmates, and was sometimes defiant. Chris's classmates were drawn to him because they were never sure what he would do next. Watching Chris was like watching a TV show; surprising, funny, suspenseful and thrilling. He was a triplet with two twin sisters. At the request of his parents, both of his sisters were placed on another sixth grade team. For the most part, although Chris had entertainment value in the class, his peers appeared wary of him and did not want to work with him in small groups. He had very low academic status in his class.

In addition to his unpredictable behaviors, Chris also had several academic challenges. Chris's behavior patterns may have been directly related to his academic difficulties, especially given that he was in a class of students with many social and academic needs and not enough adult support. Because Chris was "high-functioning" socially and could make it look like he was on-task, he may not have been receiving the amount of supervision and academic support he needed. As a result of work that may have been too challenging for him, or perhaps because the tasks were just too complicated for someone without good organizational skills to get started, Chris ended up roaming the room, "playing" instead of working. Chris did not have the same ability as Sean to force himself to stay focused and get the work done.

Although all the other students on the Spartans team displayed an increasingly sophisticated set of discussion skills over the year, Chris appeared to be reverting to more childish and silly behaviors as the year progressed. Even though all the other students in the focus group were recorded at least three times, I sent Chris with a small group to be recorded on only two occasions because I could not trust Chris to behave without adult supervision (and by this I mean being rude or inappropriate to his group mates, not just "playing" like Sean). Yet I was also curious if the discussion skill mini-lessons and frequent whole-class and small group practice were having an impact on Chris' ability to function in a small group without an adult present to help hold him in check. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, these two recordings show that Chris's behavior was unpredictable, he often said inappropriate things, and he was invariably distracting to his group.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have provided a profile of the participants of this study, the forty-eight students on the Spartans team. Beginning with an ethnographic study of the Spartans team as attempting to nurture a safe, supportive academic community, I described the challenges faced by the Spartans' teachers when trying to serve an academically and socially diverse group of students with a significant lack of special education support.

I also explored the cultures of the two class groups on the Spartans team, P7 and P6. I described each class as having a unique class identity, with P6 having a calmer, more tolerant and accepting group of students than P7. P7 was described as having a class of wide social and academic differences, along with students with a variety of unique behaviors, such as Kayla's penchant for stuffed animals, and Jonathan's extreme anxiety disorder. P7 is shown to have had greater divisions in social groups than P6, especially for the girls.

In addition, this chapter described the peer status data for the Spartans' students. I discussed my rationale for collecting peer status data based on the goals of this study. Using Cohen and Lotan's (1997) sociogram as a model, I explained how I collected student-generated and teacher-generated peer status data, and described the process for determining each child's academic, social, and overall status ranks.

Finally, I described the three criteria I used to choose the focal group of students for the study. I briefly described the five participation patterns that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the small group transcripts, and I profiled the focal students in each participation pattern group.

In Chapter 6, I will describe the discourse analysis I conducted of the thirty-one transcripts of small group recordings. The five patterns of participation briefly mentioned in this chapter will be more fully discussed, and the methods I used for determining student participation rates will be explained.

CHAPTER 6

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Overview

This chapter describes my analysis of the thirty-one small group recordings I collected during this study. Located within the frames of sociocultural theory and critical discourse analysis, this analysis explores the relationship between peer status and levels of participation within small groups in a middle school classroom. I model my analysis on the work of Fairclough (2003) to look at genre, discourse, and style as they pertain to middle school discussion groups. Using Mercer's (1995, 2008) theories on the connection between peer talk and learning as a lens, I examine the relationship between the types of talk students engaged in while working in small groups, and the types of thinking that took place during the activity. Coding the transcripts for Mercer's (1995) three types of talk, I explore students' increasing use of high-level talk in discussion groups. Applying Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice as one way to describe and measure learning, I follow the gradual changes in my students' participation and academic talk in small groups over the course of the school year.

I end the chapter with a close analysis of the participation of fifteen focal students and describe five patterns of participation that emerge from the data. Adopting Gee's (2004) approach to critical discourse analysis, I describe big "D" discourse and explore the socially situated identities of students working in small groups. I examine the form and function of language in the social practice of middle

school discussion groups and consider how changes in students' patterns of participation and socially situated identities may impact student learning.

Framing the Analysis

Sociocultural Theory

The purpose of this study was to explore the possible relationships between peer status, increased participation in small group discussions, and learning. According to Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007), sociocultural theory is a "view of human action as mediated by language and other symbol systems within particular cultural contexts" (p. 5). During my analysis, I examined patterns of student participation and use of language in small discussion groups to look for possible connections between "human action" and the function of language.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) work with communities of practice is one strand of sociocultural theory in which the researchers examine the connection between increasing participation within a community of practice and the learning that takes place for individuals. Gee (2004) writes that "a discourse analytic analysis of learning, then, needs to show how a distinctive community of practice is constituted out of specific social practices (across time and space), and how patterns of participation systematically change over time" (p. 39). Through my analysis of the transcripts collected during this study I looked to see if student participation patterns changed as students become increasingly comfortable with the social practices involved in literature discussion groups.

Exploring the Relationship between Peer Talk and Learning

Another strand of sociocultural theory framing this analysis includes the work by Barnes and Todd (1995), Mercer (1995, 2008), and Cazden (2001), especially in terms of their explorations of the relationship between peer talk and learning. In the context of literature discussion groups observed and recorded during this study, I examined whether students engaged in increased amounts of high-level thinking as they learned the language of academic discourse. Specifically, as part of this analysis I measured the rate of students' participation in the discussions and I coded the types of actions, talk, and thinking that were taking place within these small group contexts.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Additionally, having implemented a year-long curriculum of academic discussion skills with these two class groups, I examined the transcripts for issues of power and status in small group interactions. I also looked for evidence of students using academic language, specifically the genre, discourse, and style (Fairclough, 2004) of literature discussion groups. I looked at the impact academic language may have had on student participation and learning (Mercer, 1995; Gee, 2004).

Effects of Peer Status and Gender on Student Participation

Gender and Participation in Small Groups

As part of my interest in the possible effects on learning of status and power within small groups, I chose to examine student participation rates as related to gender and status. My own observations and experience over time suggested that, when students were grouped in mixed-gender groups, girls might be dominating literature discussion groups in my classes. To explore possible effects on student

participation of mixed gender groups, I determined the average adjusted participation rate[3] for all students in mixed gender groups, and then compared the results by gender.

In the P7 class, I discovered an 11% difference in participation rates between boys and girls in mixed gender groups. I found that the girls in P7 had a total average adjusted participation rate of 1.04 when working in mixed gender groups. This was higher than the boys in P7, who had an average adjusted participation rate of .93 when working in mixed gender groups. In other words, on average, the girls in P7 participated 11% more than the boys when working in mixed gender groups. This 11% difference might suggest that the girls had a little more power and status in the P7 class group than did the boys, as is supported by the peer status data for P7 discussed in Chapter 5. When working in mixed gender groups, therefore, participation for the boys in P7 may have been influenced in some way, positively or negatively, by the power and status of the girls in the group.

In P6, however, there was a very small difference in participation rates between genders in mixed gender groups. The girls in P6 had a total average adjusted participation rate of 1.00 when working in mixed gender groups, and the boys had a total average adjusted rate of .99 when working in mixed gender groups. In other words, on average, both boys and girls in the P6 class group were participating at or extremely close to an "optimal" rate when working in mixed gender groups. With a difference of only 1%, neither gender in P6 appeared to be any more or less in control

[3] The method for determining a student's adjusted participation rate is described in Chapter 3.

of group discussions. When working in mixed groups, therefore, gender did not appear to influence group participation for students in the P6 class group. The participation rates of boys and girls in both classes are summarized in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1: Average Adjusted Participation Rates of Boys and Girls in the P7 & P6 Class Groups

Class Group	P7		P6	
Gender	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Average Adjusted Participation Rate	0.93	1.04	0.99	1.00
Difference in Participation	11%		1%	

The Influence of Peer Status on Student Participation

In order to explore the possible effects of peer status on participation rates in small groups, I determined the average adjusted participation rate for each student across all group samples. In other words, if a student participated in multiple groups, I determined the adjusted participation rate for each group he participated in, and then I determined the average of all of his adjusted participation rates to come up with an average adjusted participation rate for that student. For example, Rachel participated in three recorded discussion groups, with adjusted participation rates of 1.11, 1.21, and 1.33 for each group sample. Her average adjusted participation rate, therefore, is the average of the three rates, or 1.22. This means that, on average, Rachel is participating above her proportional share of group discussions. Ethan, on the other hand, participated in four recorded group discussions, with adjusted participation rates

of .59, .17, .34, and .58. His average adjusted participation rate is .42. This means that on average, Ethan gets, or takes, less than half of his proportional share of the group discussions.

Once I had determined the average adjusted participation rate for each student, I filtered the participation data for each class group by overall status rank to determine the total average participation rate for students in each status rank in the two class groups. I found greater variability in participation rates between status groups in P7 than I did in P6. In P6 there was a 33 point spread between the average participation rates of the different status ranks, with the lowest average rate being .95 and the highest average rate being 1.28. In P7, however, there was a 73 point spread between the highest and lowest average participation rates of the different status ranks, with the lowest average rate being .72 and the highest average rate being 1.45. The average participation rates for all five status ranks are shown for both classes in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2: Average Adjusted Participation Rates by Overall Status Ranks in the P6 & P7 Class Groups

Status Ranks	1 (Lowest)	2	3	4	5 (Highest)
P6 Average Adjusted Participation Rates	1.28	1.00	0.95	1.16	1.02
P7 Average Adjusted Participation Rates	0.85	0.72	1.10	0.80	1.45

As shown in Table 6.2, the highest participation rates in the P6 class group were among students in the lowest status rank (a status rank of 1) and students in the second highest status rank (a status rank of 4). The lowest participation rates were among students who have average status in the class (a status rank of 3). Three of the five status ranks in P6 have average participation rates close to 1, the proportional participation rate. Only one of the status groups (with a status rank of 3) was participating below the proportional participation rate, and yet even those students have an average participation rate of .95, which is very close to the proportional rate of 1. In general, therefore, students in P6 with low or middle status were not being left out of group discussions, and students with high status were not dominating discussions. There is little indication of a relationship, therefore, between peer status and student participation in small group discussions in the P6 class group.

In the P7 class group, however, there is a wide gap in participation rates between students with lower status and students with highest status, as shown in Table 6.2. Students in three of the five status ranks in P7 were participating below a proportional rate, and students in the highest status rank were participating, on average, at almost one and a half times above the proportional rate of 1. For example, the lowest status students in P7 have average adjusted participation rates of .85 and .72, well below proportional participation. The highest status students have an average participation rate of 1.45, a rate well above proportional participation and a rate within the realm of "dominating" a conversation. This wide difference in participation rates between the status groups in P7, a difference of 73 points, means that, on average, students of the highest status rank were participating 50% more than

students of lower status ranks. This wide difference in participation rates suggests a relationship between peer status and student participation when students are working together in the P7class.

However, over the course of the school year, the data show that the wide gap in participation rates for high and low status groups in P7 was diminishing. For example, peer status data collected in November for the P7 class group showed that twelve students in the class were in the two highest peer status ranks, four students were in the middle status rank, and seven students were in the lowest status ranks. This suggested a clear divide between high status and low status groups in the P7 group. Analysis of participation rates indicated a corresponding gap in participation rates between students with low status and students with highest status in the P7 class group. When looking at average participation rates for the year, the students in three of the five status ranks in P7 were participating below the proportional rate, and students in the highest status rank were participating, at almost one and a half times above the proportional rate of 1.

Yet when individual student data were analyzed over the course of the school year, the data show a gradual increase in participation rates for the lower status students in the P7 group. For example, Kayla had the lowest status in the P7 class, yet her participation rates climbed steadily upward with .10, .37, and .88. The other lowest status students in the P7 class group had similar changes in participation rates over the course of the school year, as shown in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3: Changes in participation rates for low status students in P7

Low Status Students	Overall Status Rank	Part. Rate 1	Part. Rate 2	Part. Rate 3	Part. Rate 4
Nick	1	0.79	1.11		
Rachel	1	1.11	1.21	1.33	
Kayla	1	0.10	0.37	0.88	
Jonathan	1	0.55	0.85		
Kevin	2	0.76	0.87		
Grace	2	0.22	0.28	0.36	0.57

Additionally, over the course of the year the participation rates of some of the highest status students decreased in the P7 class group, as shown in Table 6.4. Ava's participation rate, for example, went from 1.75, and 2.15 down to 1.48. Another very popular girl in the class, Alyssa, had her participation rates decrease from 1.51, to 1.01, to end at .97. The changes in low and high status students' participation rates are visually depicted in Figures 6.1 and 6.2.

Table 92: Changes in participation rates for high status students in P7

High Status Students	Overall Status Rank	Part. Rate 1	Part. Rate 2	Part. Rate 3	Part. Rate 4
Ava	5	1.75	2.15	1.48	
Hannah	5	1.56	1.53	1.18	
Alyssa	5	1.51	1.01	0.97	
Brianna	5	1.73	1.17	2.16	1.57
Mia	4	1.52	1.39	1.30	
Ben	5	1.45	0.87	1.37	

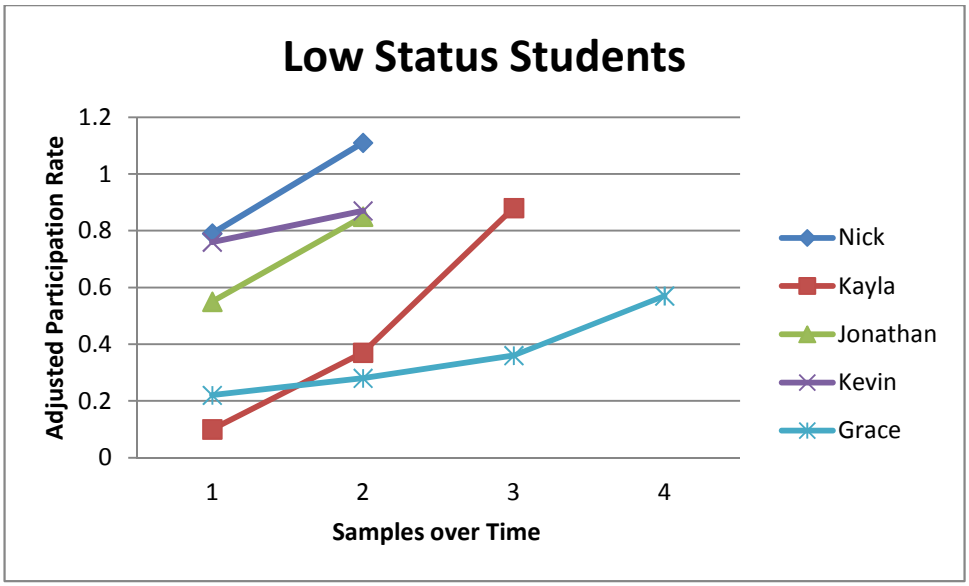

Figure 6.1: Change in participation rates over time for low status students in P7

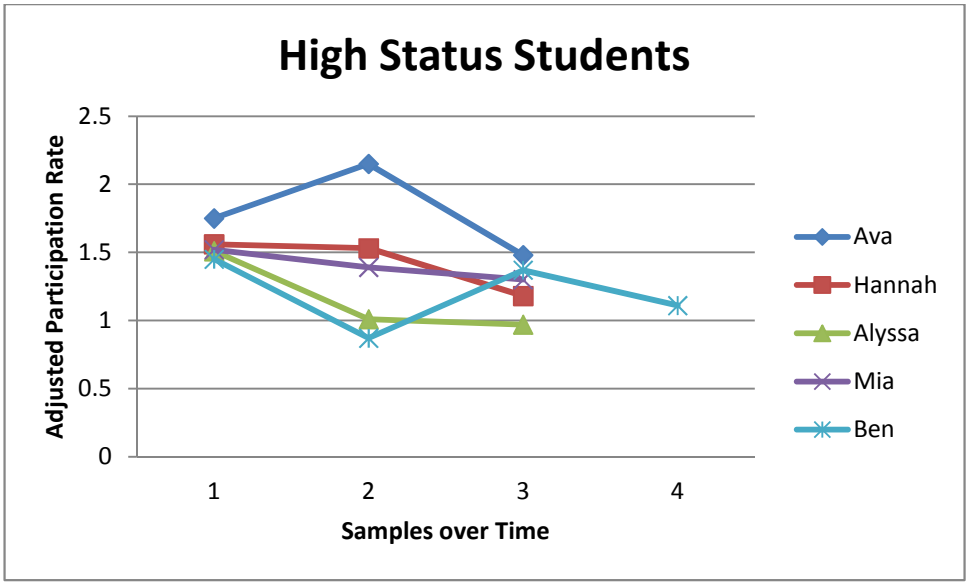

Figure 6.2: Change in participation rates over time for high status students in P7

As the visual images in Figures 6.1 and 6.2 convey, participation rates for low status students were gradually increasing over the course of the year, slowly

approaching the proportional rate of 1.0, and the participation rates for high status students were gradually decreasing, also approaching the proportional rate of 1.0. These data suggest that there may be a relationship between the discussion skills curriculum and the dynamics of peer status in the small groups in this study.

In summary, in this section of analysis I compared participation rates of boys and girls across the two class groups and broke out participation rates by status ranks in each class. I discovered that in the P7 class group there was a wide gap in participation rates for low status students and high status students, suggesting a status effect happening in small groups. However, I also described how the participation rates for both the low status students and high status students were gradually approaching the proportional rate of 1.0 over the course of the school year, suggesting that the status effects during small group discussions were being mitigated.

Overall, when looking at the data from both class groups, gender and status appeared to have little effect upon participation in the P6 group. In the P7 group, however, on average the girls appeared to participate more than boys in mixed gender groups, and the highest status students were participating up to 50% more than students of lower status ranks in the class. Later in this chapter I will focus on a few students to unpack how much their participation patterns may vary depending on the composition of the group.

The Context and Culture of Literature Circles

"Performing a Text"

The thirty-one recordings collected during this study were each collected in the context of a literature discussion group. Earlier in this chapter I referred to Lave

and Wenger's (1991) work that describes learning as "increased participation in a community of practice." I see a clear connection between Lave and Wenger's description of learning and that of Norman Fairclough. Fairclough (2004) describes learning "as a performativity of texts—both spoken and written" (p. 225). In this study I was interested to see if, as my students became increasingly fluent with the text and culture of academic discussions, they would begin to participate more, or more equitably, in small group discussions. I analyzed the transcripts for evidence of students' increased participation in the learning community, their increased "performativity of text," as Fairclough describes it—and in this case the "text" is the academic discourse of a literature discussion group.

As part of critical discourse analysis, Fairclough (2003, 2004) analyzes social practices by looking at their "orders of discourse." Fairclough (2004) writes:

> Social practices such as teaching and learning are mediated by structures and events and are networked in particular ways through orders of discourse. Orders of discourse are comprised of genres, discourses, and styles, or "ways of interacting," "ways of representing," and "ways of being." (p. 225)

My goal as a teacher is to help students participate fully in the academic culture of small group activities with their peers, thereby allowing them to engage in high level thinking and to develop greater understanding about the content under study. Examining the transcripts of literature discussion groups through Fairclough's "orders of discourse" is one method of analysis I used to look for evidence of learning, defined here as increased participation in academic discussion groups, or increased "performativity of text" by students.

Genre: Ways of Interacting

To analyze the data in terms of students' increased performativity of text, first I looked at the transcripts through the lens of Fairclough's (2004) "genre" or "ways of interacting." For example, a literature discussion is one discussion genre that has its own ways of interacting. Literature discussions use the "discourse of school" and often occur in humanities classes. Conversations about literature are speculative, relying on readers' interpretation of, and connections to, a text under study. Literature discussions are different than science lab conversations or the talk of students collaborating to solve a math problem; they rely on participants being able to follow the thread of the conversation, build on other people's ideas, find evidence in a text to support an idea or opinion, make connections to other texts and to the world, and make inferences and predictions.

At the beginning of the year in early October, before I first used the discussion markers I call "talk tickets" with students[4], I discovered that students could provide a general description of the genre of a "literature discussion." As discussed in Chapter 4, my sixth grade students were able to list the "ways of interacting" that should be seen in a high-quality literature group discussion, such as looking at the speaker, not interrupting people who are speaking, making sure everyone has a chance to speak, explaining ideas with details, and so on. Yet that very same day, with the brainstormed list of ways of interacting in a quality discussion group hanging on the

[4] "Talk tickets" are multi-colored slips of card stock in three different shapes that students use to track a discussion; visible discourse markers that allow students to "see" turns and track participation.

board, the students were not able to demonstrate that they could actually *perform* the genre of a small group discussion. The talk tickets were visible evidence of some students being too talkative during the discussion while other students did not participate at all. Plus, as seen during my initial base-line observations collected in early fall, some students interrupted each other and others were exhibited behaviors not generally associated with a high-level group discussion. For the purpose of this study, a "high-level" group discussion is a discussion in which students are provided equitable opportunities to participate, maintain focus on the task or discussion topic, use the language of a literature discussion, support ideas with details and/or specific evidence from the text(s) under study, and engage in high-level thinking.

Since my focus was to help students develop the skills needed to interact successfully in the genre of a discussion group and thereby create a discussion structure that could promote high-level thinking and learning, I had implemented the year-long series of mini-lessons I created to foster small group discussion skills. Analysis of the transcripts from December to June reveals evidence that most students increased their ability to interact appropriately in discussion groups, especially when compared to the early base-line observations I conducted in October or when compared to the first day using the talk tickets, as described above.

Take, for example, a second excerpt from Owen's Lucas Group, collected in April (shown in Table 6.5). In this excerpt, four boys, Owen, Evan, Robert, and Jacob, have just started to discuss the book they were reading, <u>The Apprenticeship of Lucas Whitaker</u>, by Cynthia DeFelice. Lucas Whitaker is a 12 year-old boy living in the 1840s whose entire family dies during an outbreak of consumption (tuberculosis),

and who then becomes an apprentice to a doctor. In this excerpt from the group's discussion, the boys are debating whether the doctor should use a mysterious "cure" on a sick girl. The "cure" in question is based on an old wives' tale, not medical science.

Table 6.5: Excerpt 2 from Owen's Lucas Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utterance**	**Transcribed Speech** Short pause noted: … Transcriptionist note: (making odd sounds) Interrupted speech: bel- Overlapping speech: /cat/
5	Jacob	1	Alright,
		2	Well, do you think they will use the cure on Sarah?
		3	If so, do you think it will save her life?
6	Evan	1	Well, it depends like, how sick, like Sarah is, like
		2	Like, um, she's kinda very sick with the disease (scratching noises)
7	Jacob	1	Yeah
8	Evan	1	I'm not exactly a doctor, but,
		2	I'm not really sure if it would be that helpful
	X		(phone ringing in background)
9	Robert	1	/I, I /
10	Owen	1	/Do/ you have any thoughts, Robert?
11	Robert	1	I don't think it will work
		2	I don't think it will work because,
		3	Um, you can't-if-as you were reading, it sounds as if Sarah were really, really bad
		4	And, you couldn't probably save her right now
		5	Because she is so sick
12	Jacob	1	But if you couldn't save her
		2	Why wouldn't you just try it for-
13	Robert	1	Oh, I would try it, of course
14	Evan	1	Yeah, what've you got to lose, /Sarah/?
15	Jacob	1	/Yeah,/ there's
		2	there's no reason why you shouldn't
16	Robert	1	Yeah, I would try it
		2	But I don't think it would work
17	Owen	1	Yeah, that's a great point, Robert, um
18	Evan	1	If you don't think it would work,
		2	Then why would you try it?

19	Jacob	1	Because you really have no hope
		2	She's gonna die either way, well like
20	Robert	1	If you try it, /maybe she won't-/
21	Jacob	1	/There's a small chance/
		2	Yeah, there's a small chance that it will work
22	Owen	1	Yeah, it's a good point
		2	Evan, would you like to share your /discussion question?/

Several aspects of this discussion excerpt indicate the boys' ability to "perform" the genre of a literature discussion group. The first thing to note is that by turn 5 the boys are already focused and on task. They have not wasted any time on getting settled, on small talk, or on organizational or procedural tasks. Owen, the facilitator, made an initial invitation to share and Jacob accepted on turn 5, where the excerpt begins. Other things to notice in this excerpt include Owen's tracking of the interactions within the group. For example, at turn 10 he invites Robert to share, the only boy who had not spoken up to that point. In turn 12, Jacob further develops the discussion by challenging Robert's answer, asking him to rethink his idea. Together, the boys explore whether it is a good idea to try an unknown, possibly dangerous cure when a person is extremely sick. They build and expand on each other's ideas and there is very little interrupting. Owen compliments Robert at turn 17 and the group as a whole at turn 22 on the "great point" that is made. He then smoothly moves the group on to the next topic.

Throughout the longer thirteen minute discussion as a whole, the group stays focused on the task of discussing the text for the entire time. All of the group members invite someone else in the group to share at least once during the discussion, indicating that it was not just the facilitator who was aware of the inter-dynamics of

the group. These boys appear to understand the structure of the "literature discussion group" discourse genre, and were "performing the text" of a discussion group in many ways: by sharing ideas about the characters and story, inviting each other to share, building on ideas, agreeing with each other, politely challenging each other, and complimenting each other. This excerpt from Owen's group is just one example of students performing the text of a discussion group.

Discourses: Ways of Representing

Continuing with Fairclough's method of analysis (2004), I next analyzed the transcripts based on Fairclough's concept of "discourses," or "ways of representing." Fairclough defines "discourses" as "representations of the material world, of other social practices, [and] of reflexive self-representations of the practice in question" (2004, p. 228). To illustrate this idea, he uses the example of the political discourse of New Labor in the United Kingdom. In the case of literature discussion groups in a middle school classroom, we might think of the discourse of "academics" as compared to the discourse of "friends." I found evidence in the transcripts to indicate that students had been able to appropriate some of the "academic" discourse they had heard me model in class on various occasions, and that they were becoming aware of this academic language when they were using it. In this way, students were developing their skills with academic language, with the "way of representing" themselves as "academics"—people with the ability to examine an idea under study, question the idea, make new hypotheses, and explore a concept through discussion and/or debate in order to develop a greater understanding. Students had become aware of the literature discussion group as a specific cultural context and were

beginning to be able to adjust their discourse, their way of representing themselves, as a way of increasing their participation.

For example, in the following excerpts from Faith's Dar Group, four students, Faith, Hunter, Jade, and Owen, are discussing a novel called Dar and the Spear-thrower, by Marjorie Cowley. This recording was collected early in the year, in December, and has evidence of students trying out the "way of representing" themselves as academics. For instance, as shown in Table 6.6, Jade makes a comment that the chapter was "interesting" in turn 88. In turn 90, Owen adds on to Jade's comment by restating her idea with the word "intriguing," a vocabulary word the class was studying at the time. When students used words currently under study during a class conversation, I always made a comment like, "Good use of that word! You are beginning to own it!" Here, in turn 93, we see Faith doing that same thing, making a reflexive note that someone in the group had just used a vocabulary word currently under study in class. She is thereby representing herself, and the group, as

Table 6.6: Excerpt 1 from Faith's Dar Group

Turn	Student	Utt	Transcribed Speech
86	Faith	1	/Are/ there any thoughts for Chapter… 19?
87	Hunter	1	No
88	Jade	1	I thought, I thought it was kind of, like, weird but interesting
89	Faith	1	Yeah
90	Owen	1	intriguing
91	Jade	1	/Yes/
92	Hunter	1	(unclear)
93	Faith	1	Good /word, Owen, intriguing/
94	Hunter	1	/(unclear)/ …protective and defiant…
95	Owen	1	Could be a sensory detail
96	Hunter	1	Yeah

"academics" engaged in conversation using high-level vocabulary words. Then, we see Owen pushing the academic thinking a bit more when, in turn 95, he suggests to Hunter that Hunter had found a "sensory detail" in the book, another concept under study at that time in the school year. Moments in the discussion such as these are examples of how the students represented themselves as "academics" by noting and discussing current topics under study, by using texts to find evidence to support ideas, and by purposefully using academic language and concepts during group discussions.

In the second excerpt from Faith's Dar Group, shown in Table 6.7, we see another example of students' developing awareness of discourse structure and organization of literature groups. As part of the structure of the literature group, the facilitator needed to keep track of the group's tasks for the day. In this excerpt, we see Faith stopping the conversation for a moment in turn 130 to check that they had already done one of the tasks for the day, which was to find a new fact about the culture of humans in the Paleolithic Age (the historical time period of the story). Faith quickly realizes, with Jade's help, that the group had already found the cultural fact. Hunter then compliments Faith for reviewing the group instruction sheet, a

Table 6.7: Excerpt 2 from Faith's Dar Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
130	Faith	1	/Wait do/ we have cultural…
131	Jade	1	That's the cultural-
132	Faith	1	Oh, yeah – we have it– okay, never mind.
133	Hunter	1	Good job reviewing, Faith

comment acknowledging that Faith was doing a good job with her role of facilitator, and also a way of representing himself as an active member of an academic discussion group.

Then, in the third excerpt from Faith's Dar Group, shown in Table 6.8, we see Hunter and Faith both using the "ways of representing" of a small discussion group. As this excerpt begins, Owen has just finished reading a section of the chapter and has turned it over to Hunter to continue reading (the group members were taking turns reading sections of the story). However, in turn 140, Hunter chooses to pause in the reading to open it up for comment, a literature discussion skill students had been practicing as part of the discussion skills curriculum, and a reading strategy practiced often in class. At this point in the year, some groups were still reading chapters from start to finish without pausing for anyone to think or comment until the end, when many opportunities to make connections to the text may have been missed. Yet here, Hunter is showing that he understands that a literature discussion group is meant to "discuss" the literature, and one way to do that is to pause regularly during the reading to allow time for thinking, comments and connections. Then, in turn 141 Faith reminds Hunter that the group already has the cultural information that they are required to have, but then adds in turn 143 that Hunter can still share any ideas if he has them, another example of how this group is aware of academic discourse as being open-ended and not limited to just the tasks the teacher sets at the beginning of the period. Finally, in turns 140 and 144, Hunter uses polite language and a formal tone (as heard on the recording), a "way of representing" the discourse of an "academic" that Hunter used often when engaged in academic talk in a small group.

Table 6.8: Excerpt 3 from Faith's Dar Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
139	Owen	2	And, it's Hunter
140	Hunter	1	Thank you, Owen. (formal tone of voice, almost exaggerated)
		2	Did anyone find a culture fact or anything?
141	Faith	1	We already have it for 19 and 20.
142	Hunter	1	Okay
143	Faith	1	But if you have any ideas you can share them
144	Hunter	1	Okay, thank you (formal tone)

Style: Ways of Being

Finally, analyzing the transcripts through the lens of Fairclough's "styles" or "ways of being" revealed a great deal to me about the effects on group success of the choices students made in their "ways of being" during a small group discussion. Fairclough (2004) writes, "semiosis [discourse and language] figures alongside bodily behavior in constituting particular ways of being, particular social or personal identities…an example would be the style of a particular manager—the way a particular type of manager uses language as a resource for self-identifying" (p. 228). Middle level students also use language to create social and personal identities at school—they want to be seen as "cool" and not "geeky," for example—and they will use particular styles of verbal language and body language to create those identities.

As shown in this collection of transcripts, when working in small discussion groups, many students were able to take on the style or "identity" of "good student" or "academic." This style comes with a certain type of discourse—academic discourse, as discussed earlier. When Hunter uses a hyper-polite tone and language,

as he did in the excerpt from Faith's Dar Group in Table 6.8, he is taking on this style, his version of the "identity" of an academic. The "ways of being" a "good student" have physical styles as well, such as the ways of sitting with a group, knowing when to look in the text with the group, and other body language like looking at the speaker to indicate interest and listening. Early in the year when the students described what a good group discussion "looks like," part of describing what it looks like included describing the body language and actions of the people in the group. Students who draw little designs on the soles of their sneakers while the rest of the group is engaged in discussion are not "putting on" the identity of "academic." Likewise, students who play with objects instead of looking in the text with their group mates to find evidence of a point under discussion are not behaving in the "style" of an academic. As students worked through the discussion skills curriculum over the course of the year, the style of body language and "ways of being" in a group were one of the types of skills they practiced. By the end of the year, as documented in the data from the transcripts, teacher observations, and video recordings, the majority of the students in both classes were able to "put on" the identity of academic when working in small groups.

Take for example the excerpt from Jennifer's Fever Group in Table 6.9. Taking place at the end of April, the four girls in this group appear to have successfully "put on" the academic persona used during a literature discussion group. In this video-recorded discussion, we see the girls all sitting forward in their seats, with books, pencils, and papers out on the table in front of them. They follow the conversation and during the full twenty minutes of the discussion each girl remains

attentive to the speaker and the discussion at hand. The girls frequently look back in the text to find support for their ideas, or nod while a speaker is talking—both are "ways of being an academic" that students had practiced frequently in class.

Table 6.9: Excerpt 1 from Jennifer's Fever Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
45	Jade	1	/Okay/
		2	Jennifer, what's your question?
46	Jennifer	1	Well , I had three
		2	But I'll do the one that I think is the best (her shoulders go back, smiles, suggesting she is proud?)
		3	Which character in the book best represents you and how?
	x		(3 second pause)
47	Michelle	1	I like that question
		2	It's different and will make us think

Another one of the "ways of being an academic" in a literature discussion group, at least in terms of the social practice of discussion groups in the context of my classroom, is to come to class prepared with high-level discussion questions related to each night's reading selection. Students had participated in several mini-lessons related to Bloom's taxonomy of thinking and had practiced developing high-level thinking questions about classroom texts. In the excerpt seen here, Jennifer has proudly chosen to share the discussion question she "thinks is best," and the group responds with a moment of silence. Having learned and practiced in class that silence is often a positive thing during discussion groups (as it is often an indication that people are thinking), Michelle speaks out in her academic persona that she likes the question because "it's different and will make us think," thereby acknowledging and

valuing Jennifer's question as a high quality question appropriate for an academic discussion.

Fifteen minutes into the conversation, the girls had finished all of their prepared discussion questions and were now into open discussion. Open discussion of this sort had been extremely challenging for the students early in the year and in December, but as students became more comfortable with the genre and discourse of literature groups, they were able to sustain their "academic style" for longer periods of time, often coming up with interesting and high level discussion topics as a result. In this next example, as the girls are looking back at the book for new topics, Jennifer asks the group what they thought about the way the author ended the story. As shown in Table 6.10, Excerpt 2 from Jennifer's Fever Group, we see the girls interacting with the text, looking back in the book and analyzing the way the author begins and ends the story.

The group is discussing the book Fever, 1793 by Laurie Halse Anderson, a book about the yellow fever epidemic that swept through Philadelphia in 1793. In this story, a teenage girl, Mattie, ends up taking over the operation of her family's coffee house after her mother gets sick and her grandfather dies. Beginning at turn 301 in Table 6.10, Jennifer reads the last line of the book aloud to the group. As the girls begin to talk about the author's choice of ending, they have the idea to look back at the first line of the story, as Jennifer does in turn 308. The discussion then moves in the direction of character analysis and character change over time. In turn 325 Rebecca suggests that a "metamorphosis" has taken place, and Jennifer compliments Rebecca on that choice of word, a word from a short story and vocabulary unit in

November. Rebecca's use of the word 'metamorphosis' and Jennifer's decision to compliment Rebecca on the use of this content-related word are both examples of the girls putting on their "academic" selves. By spontaneously developing a discussion centered on content-related topics such as quality leads, great endings, and character analysis, this excerpt demonstrates the girls' ability to perform the genre, discourse, and style of a literature discussion group at an advanced level.

Table 6.10: Excerpt 2 from Jennifer's Fever Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
301	Jennifer	1	it said, "I needed to rest" (reading from last page of text)
	x		(3 second pause)
302	Jade	1	um
303	Michelle	1	I think that's, that's kind of good
		2	'Cause it's emotional and it shows that
		3	You know, in the beginning /that/ mother was like scolding her
304	Jennifer	1	/Yeah/
305	Jade	1	yeah
306	Jennifer	1	yeah
307	Michelle	1	And now she's asking Mattie to help her up the stairs
		2	So if you just had read like this page, /and-/
308	Jennifer	1	/Wait/ here's the first sentence of it (turning back to the first page of the text)
		2	"I woke to the sound of a-a mosquito whining in my left ear and my mother screeching in my right"
		3	And now she wants her help getting up the stairs
309	Michelle	1	Yeah, /so-/
310	Jennifer	1	/It's/ like she changed over these 300 pages
311	Michelle	1	Yeah, and it shows that something really
		2	Like, if you just read the first page and the last page
		3	It shows that um, that something /really went wrong/
312	Jennifer	1	/Really changed/
313	Michelle	1	/that something changed/
314	Rebecca	1	/ Yeah, it shows the/ differences in them
315	Jennifer	1	There were big changes
316	Rebecca	1	Yeah

317	Jade	1	And you can tell that like, something dramatic-
		2	Like something dramatic happened in the book
		3	Like there's yelling at her in the beginning
		4	And scolding her
		5	And then there's asking for her help at the end
318	Jennifer	1	Yeah
319	Rebecca	1	/Yeah, and/
320	Michelle	1	/And you can-/
		2	Oh go ahead
321	Rebecca	1	Oh, you can, it doesn't matter
322	Michelle	1	Okay, um,
323	Jennifer	1	You forget?
324	Michelle	1	Oh, no, and it shows like that in like a month or two
		2	Yellow fever or a bad sickness, can really change a person
325	Rebecca	1	It was kind of like a metamorphosis
326	Jennifer	1	Yeah, it was!
		2	That's a good word, metamorphosis
		3	Well, we, we have to go back in
327	Jade	1	Yeah
328	Jennifer	1	So
329	Michelle	1	Good discussion

The girls' "performing the text" of a literature discussion group and "putting on their academic selves" is also evident in turns 319 and 320, when Rebecca and Michelle begin speaking at the same time, catch it, and then each offer for the other to continue, as would be considered polite in an academic discussion. Finally, the discussion ends at turn 329 with Michelle's comment "good discussion," a reflexive acknowledgement of the high-level discussion skills demonstrated by the group, and one last moment of performing in the "style" of an academic.

Using Fairclough's (2004) three main ways of studying discourse in social practices—genres (ways of acting), discourses (ways of representing), and styles (ways of being)—as one method of analysis, I also found some transcripts with

moments in which my sixth grade students were not acting as if they were in literature discussion groups. Sometimes the transcripts revealed that students were instead acting as if it was free time or social time, as in the excerpt from Paige's Tuck Group shown in Table 6.11. Here Paige tells Sara that she is getting Haley (a girl in another group) colored pencils for her birthday. Then Sean and John chime in and the group's talk totally shifts from a discussion of the novel to a conversation about birthdays for a large segment of the transcript. The conversation continues on birthdays for several more turns before John notes that the group is "off topic," and then it still takes the group another dozen turns before they are back on task.

Table 6.11: Excerpt 1 from Paige's Tuck Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
432	Paige	1	She needs pencils
433	Jacob	1	Um, well, /she-/
434	Sean	1	/Why, /
		2	Why /would you just randomly give her pencils?/
435	Sara	1	/yeah, that was in the (unclear - trying to help Jacob?)/
436	Paige	1	Because she needs pencils
		2	She's out of pencils
437	Sean	1	Yeah, so why would you get her a gift card though?
438	Paige	1	Gift cards are awesome
439	Sean	1	Is it her birthday?
440	Paige	1	yeah
441	Sean	1	Oohhhhhhh!
442	Sara	1	It was January 16th
		2	But she hasn't /been here/
443	Sean	1	/Yeah, I had/ my birthday party in November
		2	and my birthday's in August
444	Paige	1	/I had my party in June /
445	John	1	/I had (unclear) for my/ birthday
		2	and my/ birthday's in April
446	Sara	1	I had /my birthday party in June/
447	Sean	1	/That's like one month away/
448	John	1	For my birthday I'm getting a pizza party
449	Paige	1	Oh really? well that's great

450	John	1	/All of you-/
451	Sean	1	/No, it's in August/
452	John	1	I'm getting pizza for my birthday
		2	so all of you can thank me right now
453	Sara	1	What?
454	Sean	1	Oh, you're bringing pizza in…alright
		2	I was like, you get pizza for your birthday?
		3	That's /just wonderful/

There are also moments in the collection of transcripts when students are not using academic language or discourse, and are instead using the language of video games, friendship groups, or middle school flirting. In the excerpt from Dylan's Tuck Group in Table 6.12, for example, we see Dylan and Will acting out the violence they would use to take out the man in the yellow suit, the antagonist in Natalie Babbitt's story Tuck Everlasting, as if it were part of a video game or movie.

Table 6.12: Excerpt 2 from Dylan's Tuck Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech** Short pause noted: … Transcriptionist note: (making odd sounds) Interrupted speech: bel- Overlapping speech: /cat/
481	Dylan	1	They're gonna like, try to shoot him with a shot gun
		2	Be like, blussshsh! Blusshsh! (loud, spraying gun shots)
482	Will	1	Oh! Oh! (acting like he is hit by bullets)
483	Dylan	1	And then be like
		2	Ugh! Ugh! (pretending to punch the man)
	X		(laughter)

Additionally, there are moments in the collection of transcripts in which students are not "putting on" their academic identities, but are instead bringing another social identity to the group. For example, in the excerpt from Brianna's

Fever Group in Table 6.13, Brianna puts on her "popular girl" identity for a moment (Brianna is one of the most popular girls in the sixth grade). Earlier in the transcript the group had been discussing what they would do if all of their family and friends had become desperately sick or had died, similar to what happened to Mattie, the main character in the book, Fever 1793. Here we see Brianna going back to that topic even though the group had already moved on to a new topic a dozen turns before. Brianna makes the point that she has "a lot of friends" to the group.

Table 6.13: Excerpt 1 from Brianna's Fever Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
50	Brianna	1	Well, going back to the friends thing
		2	I don't think they *all* would've died (draws out the word 'all')
		3	'cause I have a *lot* of friends (emphasis on 'lot')
			(she laughs)

Similarly, in the excerpt from Brianna's Tuck Group in Table 6.14, recorded one month earlier, Kevin has on his "cool kid" persona. He was one of the students on the team who rarely chose to replace his "cool" social identity with one more congruent to an academic discussion. As shown in this excerpt, Kevin often contributed to the groups with sarcasm and dry humor. Although Kevin's "cool guy" persona could be distracting for his group mates, it also sometimes provoked a group of students to tackle a point Kevin brought up with debate, leading them to higher level thinking. In this excerpt, Kevin's comments have a two-fold effect of bringing humor into the conversation (almost to the point of distracting them from their task), while also making vividly clear a point about Mae, one of the characters in the book

Tuck Everlasting, and her choice to violently hurt or kill the man in the yellow suit, a point not lost on the group. Later, the group spends some time discussing Mae's choice and whether she was right to "kill the dude," as Kevin questions in turn 75.

Table 6.14: Excerpt 1 from Brianna's Tuck Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech** Short pause noted: … Transcriptionist note: (making odd sounds) Interrupted speech: bel- Overlapping speech: /cat/
57	Mia	1	/Well, she wounded him mortally/
58	Brianna	1	/Like totally/
60	Jonathan	1	/yeah/
60a	Brianna	1	Why do , why do you think
		2	When she did it
		3	She did it and regretted it?
61	Kevin	1	'Cause she killed a man
62	Brianna	1	Yeah, but she /could always-/
63	Kevin	1	/Ended his life forever/
64	Brianna	1	But she, /but-/
65	Kevin	1	/Put /him in a forever darkness
66	Brianna	1	Ok well, /she-/
67	Mia	1	/We/ get it Kevin (laughing)
68	Brianna	1	She like… killed him
		2	But then she like, um, she regretted it like right after
69	Jonathan	1	Sometimes you do, you do some stuff when you're angry
		2	And then you , and then you just, like regret it
		3	'cause, like you just kinda did it
70	Brianna	1	Well, she kinda just /wanted/ to like, save Mae, er Winnie
71	Mia	1	/Yeah/
72	Jonathan	1	Yeah
73	Mia	1	Well, yeah
74	Jonathan	1	/Well, they kinda, to kinda save themselves, too/
75	Kevin	1	/But was it really necessary to kill the dude?!!/ (loudly)
76	x		(laughter)

As students in my classes became adept with the structures and expectations of discussion groups, they seemed to welcome the structure of the genre and the discourse skills as a way to help guide their interpersonal and intellectual exchanges. When students better understood the genre, or the structured "ways of interacting" of a discussion group, they were better able to monitor interactions such as interruptions and invitations. As students gradually became comfortable with academic discourse, or the "ways of representing" themselves as "doing academics," they used more academic language and began to question and explore ideas more in their small groups. Then, as students "took up" a different style, or "way of being" during these academic discussions, they created "academic identities." For many students, the genre, discourse, and style of the discussion groups leveled the playing field, so to speak, and brought students from different status ranks into more neutral positions.

As shown by some of the examples above, however, at any time during the group discussions students sometimes choose to not "perform that text" any longer, or perhaps they reached the extent of their ability to sustain the performance. At that point, students would step out of the genre, discourse, or style expected in the context of a literature discussion group, and would return to the discourse or style of "friends" often to the detriment of the group.

As Fairclough (2004) writes, "We can see texts as shaped by two sets of causal powers and by the tension between them: on the one hand, social structures and social practices; on the other hand, the agency of the people involved in the events of which they are part" (p. 229). It is true that students have degrees of power and agency within a classroom and within a small group. But by providing my

students with the skills needed to conduct a successful literature group in a classroom context, the transcripts show that students became more successful with sharing ideas equitably, with maintaining the structure of the discussion, and with delving into high level thinking and learning as a result (as discussed later in this chapter). Gee (2004) writes, "Discourses have to be learned, but immersion is still crucial" (p. 23), and Mercer (2008) said, "Adults can guide children in how to use talk effectively" (p. 9). In other words, students need explicit instruction in the discourse and styles of academia. By helping children to develop the skills needed to participate successfully in academic discussions, they also gain greater agency with making small groups work well, providing greater opportunities for groups to reach high-level thinking.

Types of Talk in a Literature Discussion Group

Connections between Talk and Learning

So far in this chapter I have discussed the sociocultural perspective as the frame for my discourse analysis, and looked at the possible relationships between power (peer status), gender, and participation in groups. Using Fairclough's (2004) "orders of discourse," I analyzed the transcripts based on the genre, discourse, and style of a literature group and the agency of students to "perform" the text of academic discourse. Up to now, the focus of my analysis has been on the equity of participation and the skills needed for participation in academic discussion groups.

However, my interest in this study was not just to examine the possible connection between peer status and participation. As Gee (2004), Lave and Wenger (1991), and others before me, I also believe in participation as one measure of

learning, and I examined the transcripts for evidence of student participation in high-level talking and thinking. Experts in the field of peer talk and learning such as Mercer (1995, 2008), Barnes and Todd (1995), and Cazden (2001) suggest a connection between student opportunities to talk about content and to solve problems in small groups, and the learning that takes place for students.

In her book *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*, Courtney Cazden (2001) suggests that group activities foster cognitive development in students because they are one way to provide "discourse as scaffold" for student learning (p. 60). Students talking together about content or a problem in a small group will think aloud, pulling from a greater network of information; they will pose ideas, debate them, and overall "share and distribute the cognitive burdens of thinking" (p. 74). Mercer (2008) takes this idea one step further and describes how he "created a basic program - a set of thinking together lessons…designed to develop children's understanding and use of dialogue as a tool for learning" (p. 5). I see echoes of Fairclough here, as students who have learned the genres, discourses, and styles of academic classroom talk might be more likely to reach greater understandings of the content under study.

As described in Chapter 3, Mercer (2004, 2008) breaks small group classroom discourse into three categories of talk: disputational talk, cumulative talk and exploratory talk. Disputational talk is "characterized by disagreement and individualized decision making" (p. 104). Cumulative talk refers to discourse in which "speakers build positively but uncritically on what the other has said" (p. 104). And "exploratory talk" refers to group talk in which "partners engage critically but

constructively with each other's ideas" (p. 104). In my interest in identifying the learning that might be taking place during group discussions, I used Mercer's three ways of talking and thinking as the next method of analysis of the transcripts collected during this study.

Three Levels of Analysis

Mercer breaks down his three types of talk into three levels of analysis. The first level of analysis is at the linguistic level of speech acts. Although Mercer's three types of talk naturally overlap during a small group conversation, there are also speech acts that act as cues to the types of talk taking place. Using Mercer's speech acts as a guide, I coded the transcripts for disputational talk, cumulative talk, and exploratory talk.

For example, as Mercer (2008) explains, when students use a lot of repetitions and elaborations, they are most likely engaged in cumulative talk. In Table 6.15, an excerpt from Sean's Dar Group, Leah, Kimberly, Sean, and Jacob engage in cumulative talk when they have a conversation about whether the main character, Dar, in Dar and the Spear-Thrower, should stay with his great uncle (Seelan) or return to his grandmother (Mora). As this section of the conversation progresses, students repeat each other's ideas at times or elaborate on ideas. For instance, in turn 46 Kimberly suggests that Dar should go back to Mora, and in turn 47 Sean agrees and then adds on the idea that Dar could "switch off" between the two clans. In turn 51 Sean suggests that the two clans could "join into one big clan." In turn 52, Kimberly agrees. In turn 53, Leah adds on that Dar would learn hunting at the "other clan" (Seelan's clan), but she agrees with Kimberly's original point about staying in contact

with Mora and Kenok (Dar's uncle) by suggesting Dar "bring them, too." Finally, in turn 58, Jacob sums up the conversation and suggests that by joining together both clans, Kenok and Seelan can teach Dar a lot together. In this way, the group has agreed with and built on each other's ideas until a final "cumulative" idea is created.

Table 6.15. Excerpt from Sean's Dar Group, a Model of Cumulative Talk

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
45	Leah	1	Do you think Dar should stay with Seelan?
		2	Do you think he would have learned anything?
46	Kimberly	1	I think Dar, he might have learned something,
		2	but I think that he should at least have gone back
		3	to see like Kenok and Mora
		4	and tell them where he was
		5	'cause he said he'd be back soon.
47	Sean	1	Yeah
		2	I think that he could've like, stayed with them in the summer
		3	Or like, during some season
		4	and then like, switch off.
48	Leah	1	/well/
49	Sean	1	/Or/ maybe that he could've told the like, two different clans, like, um about each other
50	Jacob	1	/oh/
51	Sean	1	/and/ then maybe they would join like into one big clan.
52	Kimberly	1	Yeah
		2	I think that if he told them
		3	they would join together
53	Leah	1	I think he would learn some stuff,
		2	Because like, he would ha-have like another chance to hunt and stuff,
		3	and he would also like-
		4	and I think he should have at least brought at least Kenok and Mora with him, too
		5	If he did live with the other clan
54	Jacob	1	/Um/
55	Kimberly	1	/yeah/
56	Jacob	1	Well, I think he would like, learn even more if he the two tribes uh,
		2	the two tribes, uh, like combined

57	Sean	1	‘cause like more brains /equals/ smarter
58	Jacob	1	/No like/
		2	Kenok and Seelan could teach him lots of things together
59	Kimberly	1	Yeah

According to Mercer (1995), disputational talk, on the other hand, is “dominated by assertions and counter assertions” (p. 105). There are examples throughout the transcripts of moments during group conversations when students are arguing their own point of view, or when students are arguing with other students about their behavior. In Table 6.16 we see an excerpt from Brianna’s Tuck Group in which Brianna and Mia are having an argument about which literary device the group discussed Mia would share with the class (after discussions, we often shared examples of figurative language or good discussion topics as part of our debriefing). Neither girl really provides any clear rationale for her choice, beyond Mia’s statement at turn 657 that “This one’s better, and more figurative language.” Also in this excerpt we see Kevin contributing sarcastic comments, and Mia ends up trying to get Kevin to take off the boxing gloves he had put on, an obvious sign of Kevin’s actions being off task (this transcript was recorded in the Wellness Room, a room adjacent to my classroom with weight-lifting equipment and other fitness equipment in it such as a boxing bag). The group ends their conversation in disagreement and argument.

Table 6.16. Excerpt 2 from Brianna's Tuck Group, a Model of Disputational Talk

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech** Short pause noted: … Transcriptionist note: (making odd sounds) Interrupted speech: bel- Overlapping speech: /cat/
654	Brianna	1	Ok, so I'll write, "we're as plain as salt"
		2	And what'd you say?
		3	"The feeling went reliably into her bones?"
655	Mia	1	No, No "plain as salt"
656	Brianna	1	Why?
657	Mia	1	Because this one's better
		2	And it's more figurative language
658	Brianna	1	Wait
		2	The feeling-
		3	Where our (unclear) Um, Hold On
659	Mia	1	Hey, I'm the litter- literary luminary
660	Kevin	1	/congratulations/ (sarcastically)
661	Mia	1	/And it says the/ literary luminary picks (looking at directions)
		2	picks one piece of descriptive language
662	Kevin	1	Read the other one
663	Brianna	1	It says…
664	Kevin	1	"She rocked gazing out at the twilight
		2	And this feeling-"
665	Brianna	1	-I just want /reliably into her /
666	Kevin	1	/"The soothing / feeling came reliably into her bones"
667	Mia	1	Look, chooses- The literary luminator chooses the best, most interesting
668	Brianna	1	Yeah, but we all have to agree on it
669	Kevin	1	Alright
		2	How do we stop recording
		3	Cause I think we're done
670	Mia	1	okay
671	Brianna	1	Un no no no, no, no, no, no!
672	Jonathan	1	Wait, wait
673	Brianna	1	Don't shut it-
674	Mia	1	okay
675	Kevin	1	We're done
676	Brianna	1	No wait!
677	Mia	1	Kevin, take those off (sound of thumping)

		2	Take the boxing gloves off!
678	Kevin	1	They're not boxing gloves,
		2	They're finger puppets
679	Mia	1	Well take the hand puppets off, then!
680	Brianna	1	alright
681	Jonathan	1	we're done

As Mercer describes, exploratory talk combines a little bit of both disputational talk and cumulative talk, but exploratory talk involves requests for clarification, critical disagreements, and a series of linked clauses indicating elaboration of an idea (2005 p. 105; 2008, p. 9). Take the excerpt from Nick's Lucas Group in Table 6.17 as an example. Here we see Joshua asking the group a discussion question about whether the main character, Lucas, would ever go back to his family's farm or village (after losing his entire family to a tuberculosis epidemic). "Mr. Rood" is a neighbor of Lucas' family farm, a man who looked out for Lucas when his family got sick. In turn 58 Tony expresses the opinion that Lucas won't return to his family's farm, and in turn 59 Kevin suggests that Mr. Rood will not take the trouble to look for Lucas (who had run away from the farm and become an apprentice to a doctor in a nearby village). Then, at turn 60, Nick disagrees with Tony and says he believes that Lucas will go back, beginning a "critical disagreement" in which they both eventually use story information as support for their opinions. At turn 62, Joshua asks Nick to explain why he thinks Lucas will return, which is a request for clarification. Both Tony and Nick use "a series of linked clauses" to explain their ideas. By the end of the excerpt, Nick agrees with Tony at turns 68 and 69 that Lucas will stay with Doc because Lucas is his apprentice.

Table 6.17: Excerpt 1 from Nick's Lucas Group, a Model of Exploratory Talk

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
52	Joshua	1	Alright, my question was
		2	Do you think Mr. Rud would is going to find Lucas
		3	Or Lucas is going to go /back /
53	Tony	1	/you mean Mr.Rood/
54	Nick	1	/Probably/
55	Tony	1	/Mr. Rood/
56	Joshua	1	That's what I said
57	Nick	1	That's what he said
58	Tony	1	well, I don't think he's gonna go back
59	Kevin	1	I don't think Mr. Rood's gonna look for him
		2	'cause I think he's gonna be like
		3	Oh he's not here, that's his choice
		4	If he wants to die
60	Nick	1	I think he might /go back/
61	Tony	1	/I think he's gonna stay/
62	Joshua	1	Why do you think he might go back?
63	Nick	1	I don't know,
		2	I just think he would, I mean,
		3	maybe maybe like he'll go back
		4	and try to get the cure again
		5	So he can save… like maybe the doc will get sick or something
		6	Or um the girl, well the girl's already sick, but-
64	Joshua	1	Well, I think he might go back to visit his family's graves
		2	and then come back /again/
65	Nick	1	/Yeah/
		2	Because, uh, all the other boys
		3	Like a, like a, Mrs., ah, bunce buns
66	Tony	1	Bunce
67	Joshua	1	Yeah
		2	She said that all the other boys left
		3	and like the other boy's clothes was at the house, /and um/-
68	Tony	1	/Um,I don't/ think he's gonna go back
		2	because he's the apprentice of Doc
69	Nick	1	true
70	Tony	1	Doc's starting to, Doc's really starting to like him

Another example of exploratory talk can be seen in the following excerpt from Jeremy's Lucas Group, in Table 6.18. The group had been discussing whether Doc was right to amputate a man's leg without his permission. The man had hurt his leg badly and the wound had become infected; the man had eventually lost consciousness and it was clear he would die without the amputation. In this short excerpt, Jeremy ties in an article that we had read earlier in the year titled "The Healing Power of Maggots" by suggesting that maybe Doc could have saved the man's leg using maggots instead, as doctors had done in the article. Leah challenges Jeremy's suggestion at turn 55, asking "Well what would that have done?" This results in Logan and Jeremy explaining the idea a bit more until Leah gets their point. There is no argument here; students at this point in the year (April) were beginning to understand how to question each other's ideas, asking for clarification and evidence instead of always just agreeing with group mates.

Table 6.18: Excerpt 1 from Jeremy's Lucas Group, more Exploratory Talk

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
49	Jeremy	1	/Remember/ that article we read about blow fly worms
50	Leah	1	Yeah
51	Jeremy	1	Maybe maybe if they had that they could've put that on his leg
52	Evan	1	You mean the maggots?
53	Jeremy	1	Yeah, yeah, that's what I meant, the maggots
54	Owen	1	Yeah, that's a good point, Jeremy
		2	/But I, I think that/
55	Leah	1	/Well, what would/ that have done?
		2	That would just eat all the stuff,
56	Logan	1	the dead skin
57	Jeremy	1	/the/
58	Logan	1	/And/ that's why his leg was so /large/
59	Leah	1	/oh/

60	Logan	1	'cause the dead skin was like, /ugh, piling up/
61	Jeremy	1	/Yeah, all the puff/
62	Logan	1	Puss
63	Jeremy	1	All the puss, yeah, that's the word I'm looking for
64	Leah	1	Oh yeah

These examples demonstrate that once students become comfortable with the format and language of discussion groups—once they become greater participants in a community of practice—then they may have greater opportunity to engage in high-level critical thinking.

The second level of analysis, according to Mercer, is at the psychological level, an "analysis of talk as thought and action" (1995, p. 104). For example, as Mercer writes, in disputational talk, "the relationship is competitive; information is flaunted instead of shared, differences of opinion are stressed rather than resolved, and the general orientation is defensive" (p. 105). In Brianna's Tuck Group (Table 6.16) when Brianna and Mia were disagreeing about which example of figurative language to share with the class, we clearly saw a competitive orientation. Brianna and Mia had several such arguments in the course of that group session.

Cumulative talk, on the other hand, "seems to operate more on implicit concerns with solidarity and trust." As students in my classes became more comfortable with each other, and more comfortable with academic discourse and the literature discussion format, they became more likely to try out their ideas. In Table 6.19 we see an excerpt from Ava's Roll Group that takes place in June. This group was discussing the book Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, by Mildred Taylor, an historical fiction novel about African American children growing up in Mississippi in

the 1930s. Both Kayla and Grace offer opinions without needing to be invited, a huge step in the participation skills for those girls. But more importantly, both Kayla and Grace offer reasoning for their ideas; these two girls rarely said more than "yeah" during small group discussions throughout the year, and this excerpt suggests not only an increased ability to participate in small groups for these two girls, but also a high level of trust in their group mates. The combination apparently fosters an environment in which Kayla and Grace can engage in high-level thinking and talking.

Table 6.19: Excerpt 1 from Ava's Roll Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
66	Ava	1	Would you recommend this book to /uh,/ someone
67	Kayla	1	/Oh/
		2	I thought I would
		3	Because it was really good
		4	And it teaches like kids, like, not to be mean and stuff like that
68	Ava	1	Um-hum
69	Kayla	1	Do you agree?
70	Grace	1	Yeah
		2	And I-
71	Ava	1	Sorry
72	Grace	1	And like, people still like,
		2	Racism is still going on,
		3	So I think people who read this book
		4	Would understand more
73	Ava	1	Yeah

Exploratory talk "foregrounds reasoning…the views of all participants are sought and considered" (Mercer, 1995, p. 104). Mercer explains that both cumulative and exploratory talk seem to be aimed at consensus, but that because it "incorporates both conflict and the open sharing of ideas," exploratory talk is the kind of talk that

"has been found to be the most effective for solving problems" (p. 104). This second level of analysis informed the coding of the three types of talk as I worked my way through the transcripts.

For example, there were times during my analysis of Jeremy's Lucas Group where I was struggling to determine whether a section of the text was disputational talk or exploratory talk. Sometimes it seemed like the group was challenging each other's ideas in legitimate ways, thinking critically as their group mates shared opinions, like in the excerpt shown in Table 6.20. In this excerpt, Jeremy is trying to explain why he thinks the doctor in the story was not willing to let his sick patients try one of the folk cures mentioned in the story. At turns 95-97 Logan and Jeremy seem to be arguing a bit, but the tone remains neutral (as heard on the audio recording). Then, at turn 108 Jeremy has become frustrated, and it is heard in his voice as well as being apparent in his comment to Leah, "Well, you know what I mean, Leah," to which she replies in surprise at turn 109 with a raised voice, "I do?" This is on the edge of becoming disputational talk at this point, but Jeremy backs down a bit at turn 111 with "Oh, Okay, I guess you didn't."

Table 6.20: Excerpt 2 from Jeremy's Lucas Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
80	Kimberly	1	Um, mine was why do you think Doc Beecher doesn't believe Lucas that the cure will work?
81	Jeremy	1	Well, it's probably because he's a doctor
82	Evan	1	/Well, well/
83	Jeremy	1	/And, and/ he knows that probably getting ash into your lungs or anything
		2	Would make your breathing worse
		3	Making your body function less able to do stuff
84	John	1	I solemnly disagree with you Jeremy (vocab word)

		2	It's like, what, 1914?
		3	Um, (scratching sounds)
85	Logan	1	It's 1849
86	Leah	1	Yeah, so it will be so-
87	John	1	Like 1849 and kind of like, everyone's kinda like
88	Jeremy	1	/Well, like/
89	John	1	/Dumber/ back then /than what we are like,/
90	Jeremy	1	/Well, pretty much like/
91	John	1	In 19 hun- like in the 1900s and stuff
92	Jeremy	1	Well, it's like, /say/
93	John	1	/So/ they technically wouldn't know that the uh,
		2	ash will kill you
		3	But some people might
		4	But I don't really think Doc would've known
94	Jeremy	1	Like, not exactly,
		2	I'm not trying to say it that way
		3	Like, if you, if you really take in any ash
		4	Or like take a chalk board eraser and just bang it
		5	And breathe in
		6	You'll prob-you'll probably cough, right?
		7	And you'll look like you're not, you're not not in good happy, right?
		8	'cause you're /coughing/
95	Logan	1	/Yeah, but,/ even if you like, if you breathe in campfire smoke
		2	Which it pretty much is
96	Jeremy	1	No, not not the smoke, the ash
		2	You're you're actually inhaling the ash
97	Logan	1	Yeah /same thing (unintelligible)/
98	Jeremy	1	/It's it's different to smell/ smoke
		2	But to inhale the ashes
99	Logan	1	They never inhaled the ash
100	John	1	The ash has bacteria in it
		2	Which kills the yellow like, bad bacteria
101	Leah	1	/Why would they inhale the ash if they- /
102	Jeremy	1	/How do you know it's a good bacteria?/
103	Leah	1	Why would they inhale the ash?
		2	'cause don't they like
104	Logan	1	Drink it
105	Leah	1	/they, they drink it/
106	Kimberly	1	/yeah, they drink it/
107	Leah	1	/They don't inhale it/
108	Jeremy	1	/Well, well you know/ what I mean, Leah
109	Leah	1	/I do?/
110	Evan	1	/They/ inhale /through their mouth/
111	Jeremy	1	/Oh, okay, I guess you /didn't know that

Jeremy's group continues to have a high-level discussion of this nature for the rest of the transcript. These students share ideas easily, explain their ideas, elaborate often, and do not hesitate to challenge each others' thinking. At several points in the discussion they work themselves through a question, offering ideas, refining some of them, and discarding others until they finally reach a communal resolution.

At one point in the discussion, however, I relied on Mercer's second level of analysis, an analysis of the context and tone of the discussion, to once again determine whether the group was engaged in critical talk that was "aimed at consensus" or aimed at competition and confrontation. In this segment, shown in Table 6.21, the topic of the "folk" cure again comes up, and Jeremy again tries to explain his point about smoking or inhaling ash. Quickly, at turn 164, Jeremy gets frustrated with the group, as can be inferred from the tone of this voice on the audio-recording, and from his words, "Oh you know what I mean, Oh my god." Then, at turn 167 Owen tries to refocus the group away from the debate about the ashes into a new topic. For the next ten turns, both Jeremy and Logan don't let the debate go; they keep bickering about it in between their group mates' attempts to move on. This suggests there was some kind of competition going on between Jeremy and Logan, two highly intelligent boys who are generally friendly in class. The confrontational tone and format of this segment of discussion is different from the excerpt in Table 6.20, marking this section of text as disputational talk. Finally, at turn 176 Leah finds a break in the debate to posit a new question for discussion.

Table 6.21: Excerpt 3 from Jeremy's Lucas Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
160	Jeremy	1	Wait, isn't like, in the beginning of the book
		2	Didn't didn't Lucas think smoking horse dung was the cure?
161	Logan	1	Yeah
162	John	1	Yeah
163	Jeremy	1	So it's kinda like the same thing as the ashes
163b	Logan	1	No because they never, they never inhaled the ashes
164	Jeremy	1	Oh, you know what I mean (sounding frustrated)
		2	/Oh, my god/
165	John	1	/They just /smoked horse crap pretty much
166	Leah	1	They just kinda smoked it
		2	It's like, do it
167	Owen	1	Kimberly, do you
168	Logan	1	Um, they never inhaled the smoke
169	Leah	1	Alright I'll ask my question
170	Logan	1	I mean the ashes
171	Jeremy	1	You know what I mean (frustrated tone)
172	Logan	1	No I don't (frustrated)
173	Jeremy	1	You can't exactly drink an ash
		2	It's a solid
174	John	1	Yeah you can
175	Logan	1	They put water in it
176	Leah	1	If you were Sarah Starkley's dad, would you have listened to Doc, or just let the person-in-in-would you have listened to Doc or would you have done the cure?

At the third level of Mercer's (1995) analysis of the three types of talk, he is examining talk at the cultural level. As Mercer (1995) writes, analysis "inevitably involves some consideration of the nature of 'educated' discourse and the kinds of reasoning that are valued and encouraged in the cultural institutions of formal education" (p. 105). At this level of analysis, Mercer suggests exploratory talk deserves "special attention" because it "embodies certain principles—of accountability, of clarity, of constructive criticism…which are valued highly in many

societies" (p. 105). As I examined the transcripts collected for this study, I analyzed each one for these three types of talk, looking carefully for examples of cumulative and exploratory talk. If exploratory talk is the most valued type of educated discourse, I was looking for clues as to what might allow a group to reach that type of high level of talk so that I could better understand how to foster exploratory talk with future groups of students.

A Fourth Type of Talk

As I coded the transcripts for Mercer's three types of talk, I discovered that there was a significant amount of student talk during literature groups that did not fall into any of Mercer's three categories. These examples of "other" talk were mostly related to organizational or procedural tasks. I therefore created a fourth category that I called organizational talk, a type of talk that I chose to code along with Mercer's three types. Organizational talk was the type of talk that groups did as they were getting settled and trying to figure out what they were doing, as they were shifting tasks within a group session, and as they were cleaning up. I chose to code for this type of talk because it appeared to have a clear purpose in the function of small groups. I also discovered, however, that some groups spent a great deal of time on organizational tasks, leaving fewer opportunities for the higher level thinking involved with cumulative talk and exploratory talk.

As shown in the excerpt in Table 6.22 below, Faith's Dar Group is spending quite a bit of time trying to figure out what they are doing next. They had just finished reading the required chapter, and were now moving on to some of the other group tasks, such as discussion of text, identifying figurative language or other

literary devices, or finding information about Dar's culture. In this excerpt, Jade asks if the group has found the needed cultural facts for a few of the chapters they read earlier. Because the group does not appear to be very well organized, it takes them several minutes to figure out what they already have done and what they need to do next. This type of organizational talk happens several times on this group's transcript, a sample collected in December, indicating that the group spent so much time on organizational talk that they had less time to spend on higher levels of talking and thinking. In turn 101, Hunter yawns loudly, allowing us to see the problem for students like Hunter who are dependent on an organized group and strong facilitator to keep the discussion moving in an engaging way. When groups spend too much time on organizational tasks, students like Hunter will quickly lose their focus.

Table 6.22: Excerpt 4 From Faith's Dar Group, too much Organizational Talk

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
96	Jade	1	Do we, do we have all our cultural facts for 15 and 16?
97	Faith	1	Yes
98	Owen	1	For 15 and 16…
		2	Yeah I think we do
99	Jade	1	So we've the cultural for 13, 15, 16, 17 and 18.
		2	And we already have one for ….
100	Faith	1	Two?
101	Jade	1	That's two….(unclear)..Okay
			(Papers Rustling – 10 seconds – Hunter yawns loudly)
102	Jade	1	That's Chapter 3.
103	Faith	1	Here we have 15 and 16
104	Jade	1	We have 13 and 14
		2	/But we're not done with that/
105	Hunter	1	/There's only a few minutes left/
106	Faith	1	Oh, yeah, we have it right here.
107	Hunter	1	I think we might finish,
		2	I'm /not sure/

108	Faith	1	/Okay./
		2	Yeah, We have a chapter /left/
109	Jade	1	/So we/ have…so we just have this page to do?
110	Faith	1	/Those two, and…/
111	Hunter	1	/No, I mean the whole book/
112	Faith	1	Oh no
		2	…and those two are predictions
113	Jade	1	Okay
114	Faith	1	So should we just /go in the same order?/
115	Jade	1	/Wait, so this is, this is what/ we are sharing

Tracking Types of Talk over Time

As I finished coding the transcripts for these four types of talk, I determined the percentage of group talk that each of these four types of talk amounted to in each transcript. I was interested in discovering to what degree, if any, groups changed the type of talk they were engaged in as the school year progressed. If cumulative and exploratory talk were evidence of high-level thinking, I was curious the amount of time each group spent engaged in each type of talk, and whether groups appeared to improve over time. For example, Paige's Tuck Group, recorded in February, struggled quite a bit with disputational talk, and as a result, they spent less than half of their time engaged in higher-level talk, as shown in Table 6.23.

Table 6.23: Percentage of Types of Talk in Paige's Tuck Group

Organizational Talk	Disputational Talk	Cumulative Talk	Exploratory Talk	Total Percent of Group Talk
13%	43%	42%	1%	99%

In Table 6.24, on the other hand, we see that Zoe's Tuck Group, also recorded in February, did not have any disputational talk at all, and they also performed at a much higher level of talk and thinking with a total of 70% of the talk falling into the cumulative or exploratory talk categories. In fact, over a third of the group talk was at the highest level of critical thinking in exploratory talk. By identifying the groups that had more exploratory talk and less disputational talk, I was hoping to discover what student actions or other factors were influencing the quality of a group's discussion. Student participation patterns and their influence on small groups are discussed later in this chapter.

Table 6.24: Percentage of Types of Talk in Zoe's Tuck Group

Organizational Talk	Disputational Talk	Cumulative Talk	Exploratory Talk	Total Percent of Group Talk
30%	0%	33%	37%	100%

As I finished finding the percent of total group talk for each type of talk for each group, I noted that overall, groups were engaged in more organizational talk at the beginning of the year than at the end of the year, as shown in Figure 8. This suggests that the structure of the literature group genre became more familiar to students over the course of the year, allowing them to spend little to no time on organizational talk when working in groups at the end of the year. In short, they had become full participants of the communities of practice in my classroom (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and knew exactly what to do when working in discussion groups. They no longer had to spend time on organizational tasks.

Also of note, as organizational talk decreased over the course of the school year, cumulative and exploratory talk increased in groups. Not all groups attained exploratory talk, but all the groups achieved greater success with the higher levels of talk as their need for organizational talk decreased. Figures 6.3 through 6.6 show the changes in the amounts of organizational and exploratory talk in small groups over the course of the school year for the P6 and P7 class groups.

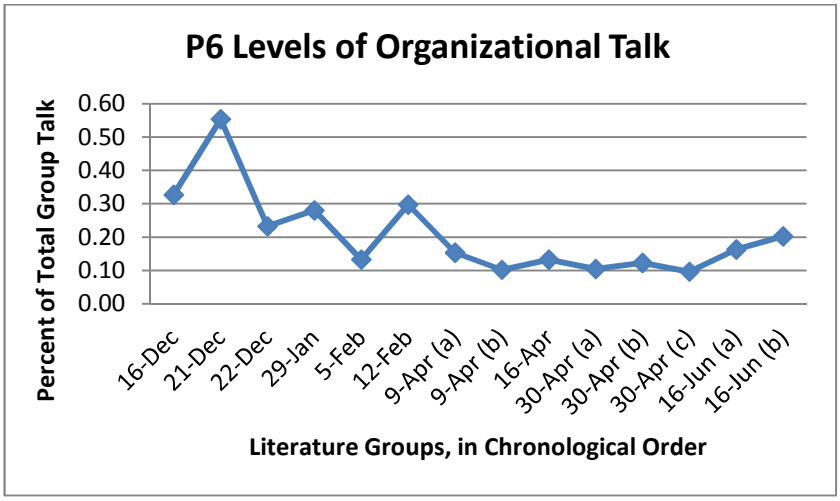

Figure 6.3: Levels of Organizational Talk in P6 Discussion Groups

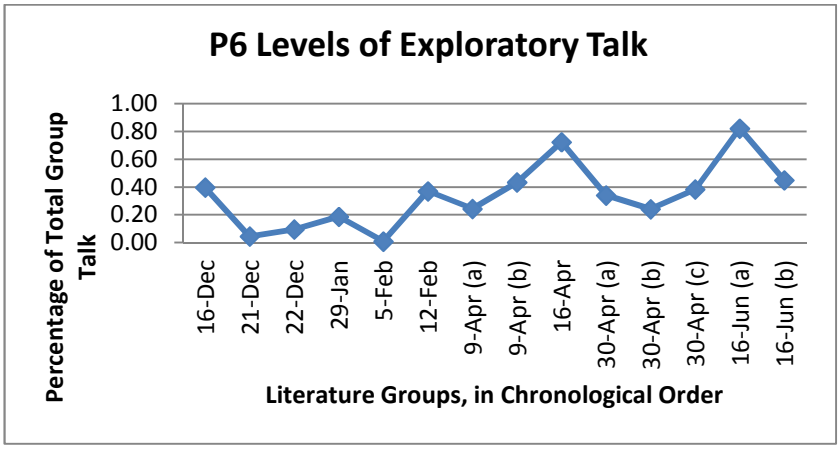

Figure 6.4: Levels of Exploratory Talk in P6 Discussion Groups

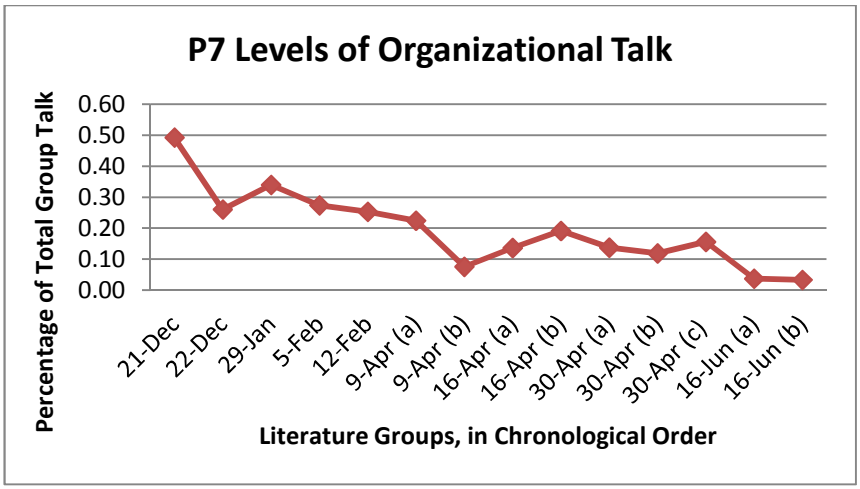

Figure 6.5: Levels of Organizational Talk in P7 Discussion Groups

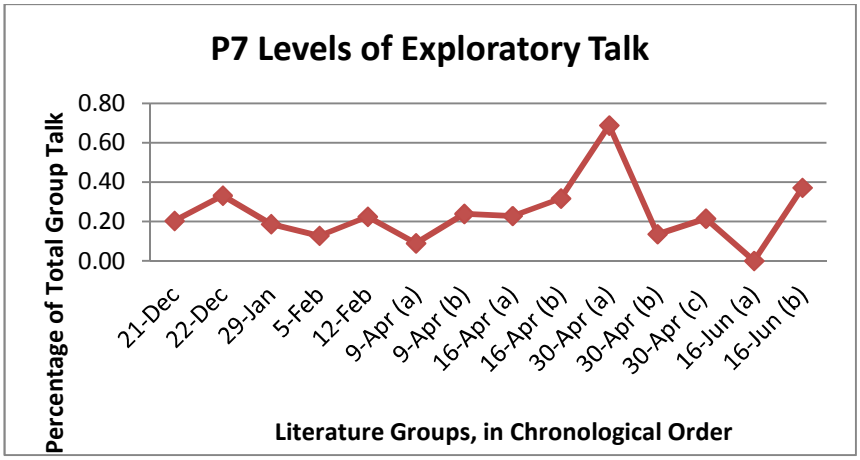

Figure 6.6: Levels of Exploratory Talk in P7 Discussion Groups

The results of coding the transcripts for the four types of talk, Mercer's (1995) disputational talk, cumulative talk, and exploratory talk, and my own organizational talk, show that as students became more comfortable with the genre, discourse, and style of academic discussions, the small groups became more efficient and students increased their engagement with the topic under discussion. In other words, as

students' abilities to participate in academic discussions increased, the general trend seen among groups in both classes is a decrease in organizational talk over time, and a corresponding increase in both cumulative and exploratory talk.

Five Patterns of Participation

After coding each of the thirty-one transcripts for Mercer's types of talk, I conducted a focused analysis of the groups that were highly successful and the groups that were less successful. I wanted to get a closer look at what was happening in successful and less successful discussion groups so that I could better understand how to foster high level discussion skills with future students.

A "successful" group is defined here as a group that has relatively balanced participation among members and has reached the high levels of talking and thinking represented by cumulative and exploratory talk. In this study, highly successful groups were characterized by strong facilitators and focused contributions by all group members. A "less successful" group, on the other hand, is defined here as a group that has a smaller percentage of cumulative talk and has little or no exploratory talk. Less successful groups in this study were characterized by weak facilitators, inequitable participation, a high percentage of disputational talk, and more time spent off-task by group members.

Through a focused analysis of these selected transcripts, I hoped to provide insight into whether the instructional decisions I had made during the school year worked to foster learning in terms of greater participation in high-level talk over time. I hoped a focused analysis would also reveal where group discourse and student

learning broke down during group discussions. Gee (2004) writes, "A discourse analytic analysis of learning, then, needs to show how a distinctive community of practice is constituted out of specific social practices, and how patterns of participation systematically change across time, both for individuals and the community of practice as a whole" (p. 39). A close analysis of select transcripts would provide useful information about the effectiveness of the academic discussion skills curriculum I had developed, especially in terms of changing patterns of student participation and opportunities to learn in small discussion groups.

Four patterns of student participation in small groups began to emerge from my analysis of "successful" and "less successful" groups, including facilitating patterns, contributing patterns, silent patterns, and distracting patterns of participation. Using a list of students I had already screened as possible focal students (a process described in Chapter 5), I selected students that were exhibiting each of these patterns of participation to create a final focal group of fifteen students to follow throughout all of the transcripts. As I studied the focal students' participation in a variety of group contexts, one more pattern emerged from the analysis: a dependent pattern of participation. These five patterns of participation provide insight into the gradually changing social practices that were promoting a community of practice in my classroom, while also highlighting moments in which students were missing out on opportunities to participate and learn.

Facilitating Patterns of Participation

Without exception, the most influential pattern of participation in terms of overall group success was the participation pattern I call a 'facilitating' pattern.

Groups who had strong facilitators were the groups that achieved the most balanced participation rates and the greatest amount of high level talk. "Facilitator" was a defined group role, but facilitation was also a set of skills that all students practiced as part of the discussion skills curriculum. For example, through the use of talk tickets as discourse markers (as described in Chapter 4), students increased their ability to monitor the dynamics of group talk. The transcripts show that all students on the Titans team developed some level of ability to monitor group discussion and invite others to share ideas. As part of my overall analysis for each transcript, turns were coded "F" or "I" for facilitating or inviting behaviors. Facilitating data was collected into charts, like the one shown in Figure 6.7 for Ben's Fever Group. In that group, Ben had been assigned the facilitator role; he had the majority of the facilitating moves, but Rachel, Brianna, and even Grace invited others to share at times during the discussion. The only person in this group who had no facilitating moves was Kayla, but she, too, showed the ability to invite others later in the year.

The transcripts show that good facilitators were organized and tuned in to group dynamics, monitoring the flow of conversation and inviting others to share in an equitable manner. But the strongest facilitators also helped a group maintain focus on a discussion topic, pushing group members' thinking and talking from cumulative talk into the level of exploratory talk through the use of follow-up questions and wait time. In addition, the strongest facilitators were good listeners, often leaving their own input into discussions for last.

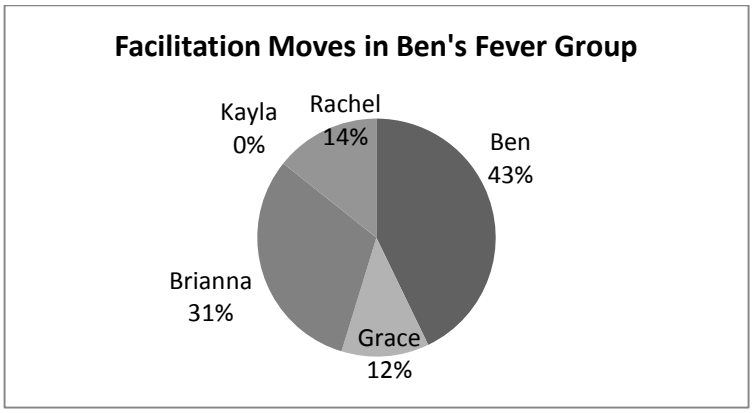

Figure 6.7: Facilitation moves per student in Ben's Fever Group

Jasmine, from the P6 class group, is one of the strongest facilitators on the team. In the excerpt from Sara's Fever Group in Table 6.25, Jasmine uses wait time to allow her group mates to have time to develop thoughtful responses to a challenging, high-level discussion question. In turn 207 Jasmine begins with her discussion question, and is immediately faced with silence. Jasmine allows the moment of silence happen, demonstrating that she understands the importance and usefulness of silence during discussions. She does not try to fill the gap with an example or with her own response. Then, in turn 209 Jasmine asks Abby a follow-up question, and once again allows Abby to have wait time to develop her reply. In the meantime, the other two group members are also getting valuable time to develop quality, thoughtful responses.

Jasmine also listens carefully to all of her group mates' ideas. For example, in turn 211, Jasmine is able to help Abby find a word she was looking for, thereby allowing Abby to continue to develop her ideas. Sometimes in groups the group members may not be listening close enough to each other to help a group mate out in

this way, and the conversation moves to the next person instead of going deeper into the topic at hand. Another example of Jasmine's strong facilitation skills is seen in turn 216 when she challenges Zoe's assertion that she "predicted every single chapter" by countering with "You predicted her finding a little girl?" In this way, Jasmine invites Zoe to be more specific with her claims (which she isn't really able to do in this case), a characteristic of exploratory talk. In all, Jasmine turns what could have been a rapid fire series of single word turns into a thoughtful discussion.

Table 6.25: Excerpt 2 from Sara's Fever Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Talk**
207	Eliz	1	What were your overall feelings about fever
		2	Like if you could describe it in one word
		3	Like how you felt about the book, what would it be?
208	Abby	1	Hum… different
209	Eliz	1	Why? (pause)
210	Abby	1	Because it's like good
		2	But it's like, most books are about like a kid that goes to school
		3	And they're weird,
		4	And like, most books like, have the same kinda of like…
211	Eliz	1	Plot?
212	Abby	1	Yeah, like they all go the same way
		2	But this one was like, different
		3	'Cause it's from a long time ago
		4	And it was about a fever and stuff
213	Sara	1	I agree
214	Haley	1	Yeah, I do, too
215	Zoe	1	If I got one word
		2	I'd say predictable
		3	Because I predicted every single chapter
		4	it happened exactly like I predicted it
216	Eliz	1	You predicted her finding a little girl?
217	Zoe	1	I pretty much predicted like the whole thing
		2	It kinda happened that way
		3	I'm good at predicting things

Robert is also an excellent facilitator from the P6 class group. As shown in the excerpt from Hunter's Roll Group in Table 6.26, Robert' skills as a facilitator helped these boys push their discussion into the realm of exploratory talk. In this excerpt the boys have finished the discussion questions they started with, and have now moved into open discussion time in which they are developing some of their earlier ideas. This excerpt can be coded as exploratory talk because the boys challenge each others' ideas several times, politely but clearly, thereby pushing each other to go deeper with their thinking. This excerpt is also marked by its long turns and use of "a series of linked clauses," as the boys explain their thinking, a type of speech act that is evidence of exploratory talk (Mercer, 2008, p.7).

For example, in turn 48 Owen challenges John's ideas, and in turn 52 Robert challenges Owen's ideas. Then, Robert and the other boys gently push Owen to see the flaw in his argument about whether there would be any physical evidence that Papa lit the fire. In the story Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, the character Papa lights his own cotton field on fire in order to distract a white mob from their midnight task of hanging a black boy accused of a crime. The boys had earlier been discussing whether Papa, also a black man, might get in trouble for starting the fire. When Owen chooses a silly, illogical response with "What if it was a special kind of match" in turn 66, Robert replies with polite skepticism in Turn 68, "Owen, really?" thereby holding firm to the expectation for serious academic conversations in discussion groups.

Table 6.26: Excerpt 1 from Hunter's Roll Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
45	Robert	1	John?
46	Owen	1	yeah
47	John	1	Well, I'd like to add on to the second and the first question
		2	I'll go to the first question first
		3	Um, Papa was like, actually kinda of smart
		4	On by lighting the fire
		5	And uh, the second one, was kinda like Owen said,
		6	It had good vocabulary, um, good scenes
		7	And um, a really good book overall
		8	You should g-you should read it
		9	/I recommend it to someone/
48	Owen	1	/Uh, John, I have a little bit/ to argue with the first question
49	John	1	Go Owen
50	Owen	1	Uh, she, I mean he's smart and all
		2	But what if, he didn't really think of the consequences
		3	If, they had found out
		4	So that's one of the bad things,
		5	And as Robert said earlier,
		6	It just destroyed a lot of the cotton
51	John	1	A fourth of the cotton
52	Robert	1	But I, I have a question on what you said Owen
53	Owen	1	Yes Robert
53b	Robert	1	Because of the lightning storm
54	Owen	1	Stop it (whispered, probably to Hunter)
55	Robert	1	There's a lightning storm was going on
		2	They would have thought-
		3	There was no evidence that he started the fire
56	Owen	1	/Yes, but/
57	John	1	/Exactly/
58	Robert	1	Everything /would have burned/
59	Owen	1	/To defend-to defend/ my point,
60	John	1	/But/
61	Owen	1	Who knows, maybe he used a match
		2	and just threw it /somewhere/
62	John	1	/Well the match/ would have burned up anyways
63	Robert	1	Yeah, I know,

		2	The match would have burned up
64	Owen	1	What if it was a /special-/
65	Mrs. C	1	/You can/ come in now!
66	Owen	1	What if it was a special kind of match
		2	Thennnnn, maybe it wouldn't have burned up
67	Hunter	1	Bye!
68	Robert	1	Owen, really?
69		2	Okay, bye

Dylan, from the P7 class group, is another strong albeit unlikely facilitator. A talented athlete who was popular with his peers, Dylan did not usually take on the identity of an "academic" during classroom activities. Dylan seemed to struggle a bit in group discussions at times, and did not always have much to share. Yet through the use of talk tickets and discussion skills mini-lessons, Dylan quickly assumed the "socially situated identity" of facilitator when given the role. Gee (2004) defines a social language as "a way of using language so as to enact a particular type of social identity" (p. 41). When Dylan was given the "social language" of "facilitator" to structure his participation, he enacted the role of facilitator by keeping track of group dynamics, inviting people to share, keeping the group organized and moving along the daily tasks, stopping during the reading of a text to ask questions, and in many ways expanding the discussion and thinking in his group.

For example, early in the year Dylan was the facilitator of a group reading Dar and the Spear-thrower. As shown in the excerpt from Ben's Dar Group in Table 6.27, Dylan had the group pause during reading to ask for predictions in turn 50. Predictions were one of the discussion skills the class had been practicing as a way to

develop higher level thinking during discussions. Again at turn 59, Dylan does not let the group go back into reading yet; instead he prods his group mates' thinking a little more by asking about the "spirit-cat" in the book. In doing so, the group develops several more predictions about the story and is engaged in exploratory talk.

Table 6.27: Excerpt 1 from Ben's Dar Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
50	Dylan	1	Ben, before you read
		2	do you guys, like, have any predictions what might-
		3	/like what/ happens next
51	Ben	1	/um,/ I think that Kenok might be nicer now
52	Olivia	1	yeah
		2	And like, he understands that Dar can kind of like, be like a man /now,/
53	Ben	1	/yeah/
54	Maddie	1	And doesn't need help.
54a	Ben	1	And he's kind of like his father,
55	Olivia	1	Yeah
56	Ben	1	And not as much of a, like, a wimp
57	Olivia	1	/Yeah/
58	Ben	1	/And like,/ not as good at hunting as he thought.
59	Dylan	1	Well do you guys have any thoughts about the spirit cat, or the /dagger-tooth cat?/
60	Ben	1	/I think it's gonna/ come back.
61	Dylan	1	Yeah, I think it's gonna come back,
		2	And, like, they're gonna like-
61a	Ben	1	-kill it
62	Dylan	1	yeah
63	Olivia	1	yeah
		2	And they're gonna find, like, his father's something,
		3	Like maybe the bracelet or something.
64	Ben	1	It's going to be inside the cat
65	Olivia	1	Yeah
		2	or, like stuck to its fur or something.
66	Dylan	1	Yeah (half laugh)
67	Ben	1	And they'll like, go back to the den

		2	And it's like, living in there.

Like Dylan did in this excerpt, strong facilitators became increasingly adept over the course of the year with helping a group expand their thinking and sustain attention on a single topic for longer periods of time. Facilitation provided greater opportunities for students to develop high level thinking over the course of a discussion. With strong facilitators and with all students learning the art of facilitation, student participation patterns in small groups gradually changed from quick turns around a circle in which students "reported" their ideas to the group, to highly developed, sophisticated academic discussions in which students explained and elaborated on their own ideas, challenged each others' ideas, and in many ways pushed each others' thinking with exploratory talk.

Contributing Patterns of Participation

Over the course of the school year, students in my classes gradually increased their ability to "perform" academic discourse in small groups. In other words, my students were developing their identities as "academics" when working in small groups. As Gee (2004) writes, however, students could not enact academic identities and perform academic discourse by themselves:

> A person cannot enact a particular kind of person all by themselves and by using only language. A *Discourse* (with a capital "D" –I use "discourse" with a little "d" just to mean language in use) is a distinctive way to use language *integrated* with "other stuff" so as to enact a particular type of socially situated identity. [Italics & parentheses original] (p. 46)

Highly successful groups were characterized by strong contributing patterns of participation by students. Strong contributors were students who employed the social language of academic "Discourse" during small group discussions, along with some of the "other stuff" Gee refers to, such as the body language of good listening, objects (in this case, the texts under study), and the time and space provided for the discussion. Contributing patterns of participation included routinely facing the speaker, including others in the group through verbal and non-verbal invitations, looking back in the text to support an idea or check another student's idea, staying focused and on-task, and consistently adding ideas to the discussion. The majority of students on the team gradually increased their contributing patterns of participation over the school year.

Leah, from P6, was a model contributor. Her participation patterns included inviting others to share, listening attentively to the speaker (as demonstrated by her body language and her responses), staying on task even when something distracting happens in the group, sharing her ideas frequently, and building on her own and others' ideas during discussion. In the excerpt from Leah's Tuck Group in Table 6.28, we see several of these contributing patterns from Leah. The group is discussing the book Tuck Everlasting, a story about a family who is immortal and a young girl who has to the choice to be immortal. In turns 52 and 55, Leah invites her group mates to share, even though she is not the facilitator of this group (Robert is the facilitator). In turn 58 Leah does not allow herself to get distracted by Hunter's giggles as he makes a joke referring to Mr. Tuck's appearance as described in the book, and instead politely asks Robert to repeat his question. Leah proceeds to offer

an idea in turn 60 and explains her reasoning about why she would be happy to live forever. Then in turn 62 she expands her thinking in response to Hunter's challenge. She suggests she would go to the center of the earth if she could live forever (a science topic they had just seen a movie about). This idea jump starts the group on a long discussion about what they would do if they were immortal.

Table 6.28: Excerpt 1 from Leah's Tuck Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
52	Leah	1	What do you think, Hunter?
53	Hunter	1	I think they shouldn't of
		2	Because I'd like to see her
		3	See her be all, be all flustered
		4	that she's not getting any older…
		5	She'd be all flustered,
		6	why am I not getting any older?
54	Leah	1	Yeah,
54b	Robert	1	Okay
55	Leah	1	What's your question?
56	Robert	1	Mine is
		2	Like Mr. Tuck, would you have been upset to wake up another day and do the same thing forever, and why
57	Hunter	1	No because I don't have a melancholy face (giggling)
58	Leah	1	Could you repeat the question please?
59	Robert	1	Like Mr. Tuck, would you have been upset to wake up another day and do the same thing forever
60	Leah	1	Nope
		2	because I would be happy
		3	And I would actually have more time to do whatever I wanted in life
		4	'cause I'd live forever
61	Hunter	1	But eventually you'd run out of things to do
		2	Like if you visited China
		3	Okay you had real Chinese food
62	Leah	1	Yeah, but what if I wanted to …
		2	Uhhhh, since I could never die,
		3	Go to the center of the earth!

Like Leah, Jacob was one of the more remarkable contributors in the class. He was painfully shy and had been a selective mute up until second grade. Through frequent practice with talk tickets, which provided Jacob an incentive to participate while also motivating his classmates to hold back their sometimes dominating discussion habits, Jacob became increasingly competent with academic discussion. Perhaps the structure of the discussion format provided Jacob with greater opportunities to share ideas than the unstructured conversation typical of a group of friends. As Gee (2004) writes, "Discourses are always defined in relationship to other Discourses" (p. 46). The structure of academic Discourse had been made clear in my classes, whereas the Discourse of friends may be much less structured and therefore maybe more challenging for Jacob. By the end of the school year, Jacob was a very strong contributor. His pattern of participation gradually increased during the year to include sharing his ideas, inviting others to share, noting when a group is "off task," and adding on to other people's ideas to build a conversation.

In the excerpt from Owen's Lucas Group in Table 6.29, we see Jacob displaying several of these participation moves. In turns 114 and 116, for example, Jacob is challenging and adding on to Evan's idea. Then, Jacob is seen moving the group along in the task by shifting topics in turn 120(1) and inviting Owen to share in turn 120(2).

Table 6.29: Excerpt 2 from Owen's Lucas Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
113	Evan	1	The doc, the Doc didn't really do that good of a job
		2	He said I'm just gonna strap you down and bleed you

114	Jacob	1	Because it's early, it's like not-
115	Evan	1	-But that's not something you tell a seven year old
116	Jacob	1	But it's not like the modern day medical that we have
117	Robert	1	Yeah, they usually put you to sleep
	X		(laughing)
118	Evan	1	Well, I don't know how
		2	But they did it once
		3	They got to do it with the big guy (???)
119	Owen	1	I know
120	Jacob	1	Alright,
		2	Owen, you want to share yours, now?
121	Owen	1	Um, yeah, thank you Jacob
		2	If you were Lucas, would you have become an apprentice?
		3	If not, what would you do, and explain your reason

Jacob's contributing patterns of behavior are also seen in Tables 6.30 and 6.31, both excerpts from Paige's Tuck Group. In the first excerpt, Jacob is seen trying to get the group back on task in turns 503, 507, and 511. Then, in turn 541 of the second excerpt, Jacob helps the group find a new topic of discussion for the last two minutes of their group time.

Table 6.30: Excerpt 2 from Paige's Tuck Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
	Paige	2	And all the books went woooshh!
503	Jacob	1	We're off topic
504	Paige	1	That's my eraser
505	Sean	1	Wooshhh
506	Paige	1	Oh, we're off topic
507	Jacob	1	We're off topic
508	Sara	1	Give me my eraser
509	Sean	1	woosshhh
510	John	1	Guys…
511	Jacob	1	We're off topic
512	Sara	1	Sean, Give me my eraser

513	Jacob	1	We're off topic

Table 6.31: Excerpt 3 from Paige's Tuck Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
533	Sara	1	Two minutes left
534	Paige	1	We used up…23 minutes and 32 seconds
		2	So we need to talk for another two minutes
536	Sean	1	So
537	Paige	1	So
538	John	1	The economy
539	Sean	1	No let's talk about the book
540	Sara	1	No, In ten seconds
541	Jacob	1	So, what is your first impression of the book?
542	Sara	1	I like it
543	Sean	1	Well, not really at first

Contributing patterns of participation, like the examples shown here by Leah and Jacob, gradually became the norm in small groups as the majority of students on the Titans team developed their skills with academic Discourse, with the big "D" as Gee describes. A small percentage of students on the team, however, never became strong contributors.

Silent Patterns of Participation

A third pattern of student participation in small groups was a pattern of "silent" participation. Silent patterns of participation are characterized by students who rarely say more than one word agreements, if they talk at all. Silent patterns of participation included not talking unless invited directly, and by saying "yeah" and "I agree" or "I don't know" when asked for an opinion. Students who exhibited silent

patterns of participation had average adjusted participation rates of less than .50, and in some group contexts, their participation rates were as low as .28, .17, or even .10. In other words, if proportional participation is a rate of 1, then on average, students exhibiting silent patterns of participation were participating at a rate of less than half of an proportional share of the discussion. Sometimes these "silent" students would participate at the rate of just a tenth of a proportional share of the conversation.

Grace, a student in R7, is one of the students who typify the silent pattern of participation. Grace had an average participation rate of .47 over five samples, with a high rate of .63 when she was in a group with a strong facilitator, and a low rate of .28 when she was in a large group that included three dominating girls and a weak facilitator. All year Grace rarely tried to get the floor on her own. When she was invited to speak, she would say very little, such as "yeah" or "I agree." Up until June, the only time Grace said more than "yeah" was when she was directly invited to share by another group member.

For example, in the excerpt from Haani's Tuck Group in Table 6.32, Grace is invited to speak by Ava in turn 113, and Grace gives a brief answer. She neither thinks to expand or explain her idea, nor do any of her groupmates ask her to expand or explain. Ava was the facilitator of this group, and although she was good at inviting others to share she did not always think to ask follow-up questions (in fact, Ava cuts Madison off in turn 119 when Madison was about to elaborate even more). Grace agrees with her group mates two times during this brief passage, at turns 116 and 121. In contrast to Grace's brevity, we see Madison and Ava both having multi-utterance turns in which they explain their ideas.

Table 6.32: Excerpt 1 from Haani's Tuck Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
109	Ava	1	How would you feel if you had to stay overnight with the Tucks?
110	Ben	1	I'd be like, party all night
		2	Yeah
	Grace		Chuckles
111	Ava	1	No, really, how would you?
112	Ben	1	I don't know
113	Ava	1	Grace?
114	Grace	1	Well, I would feel kinda scared
115	Haani	1	I'd feel kinda awkward
116	Grace	1	yeah
117	Madison	1	Well , I would be, um, scared,
			But the way that she describes the Tucks,
		2	It makes, like, it kinda sounds like they're like *caring* people
		3	Which they are
		4	And she might, um, like, I wouldn't feel so scared
			that I wanted to like, *leave*
118	Haani	1	Yeah
119	Madison	1	But I would be like-
120	Ava	1	Well what I would do was like-
		2	Well, cause they describe like, when she was like, laying on the couch they described it so well
		3	And it seemed kinda creepy
		4	Like just sitting there
121	Grace	1	Yeah

Although Grace was a shy student who did not have a lot of self-confidence, she did try to take the floor on a few occasions during this discussion, but her group mates did not "take up" her talk. For instance, in the excerpt in Table 6.33 from the same discussion group, Grace tries to get the floor at turns 123 and 125, but is unsuccessful both times. It could be that Grace's group mates did not hear her, since Grace tended to speak very softly, but it is also possible that there was some peer status at play in this discussion. Both Jack and Ava had very high peer status, Haani

had middle to high status, and Madison had average status. Grace had the lowest status of the group; her low status combined with her quiet voice and timid nature may have contributed to the group's behavior of simply "over looking" her.

Table 6.33: Excerpt 2 from Haani's Tuck Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
122	Ava	1	And like how she heard the footsteps that just ended up being, like, Jesse
		2	So, like, I'd be kinda creeped out
		3	But then I would kinda wanna stay
		4	'cause I wouldn't wanna like, go home in the middle of the night
		5	So I'd just kinda, be like…
123	Grace	1	/And like,/
124	Haani	1	/It'd be even/ more scary
125	Grace	1	they like /kept her/
126	Haani	1	/So Jack,/ what was your discussion question?
127	Jack	1	I haven't even answered that one
128	Ava	1	Oh yeah, /what do you think?/
129	Haani	1	/Oh yeah, Jack/ what do you think?

During the last recording in June, however, Grace showed that she had in fact learned a lot about how to participate in an academic discussion. Although her participation rate for that last discussion was still low, at .57, it was higher than all but one of her other five recorded discussions. As shown in the following excerpts from Ava's Roll Group in Table 6.34 and 6.35, Grace was enacting her socially situated identity of "academic" by expanding her ideas and by sharing ideas without being invited. In the first excerpt, Grace has a six utterance turn, very unusual for her.

Table 6.34: Excerpt 2 from Ava's Roll Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
48	Ava	1	Yeah
		2	What'd you guys write for your blogs?
49	Grace	1	Um, I wrote, like,
		2	I enjoyed the book
		3	And, maybe I'd read the second one
		4	If I was like, that into it
		5	But, it's a good book,
		6	But, I, wouldn't read it again

In the next excerpt from Ava's Roll Group, Grace again initiates her own turn and has an eight utterance turn. Therefore, even though Grace's participation rate for this group discussion was only .57, her average number of utterances per turn, which had previously always hovered around 1, was 2.81 for this group discussion. By initiating her own turns and by expanding and explaining her ideas, Grace showed that she had changed her pattern of participation from December to June.

Table 6.35: Excerpt 3 from Ava's Roll Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
89	Ava	1	Like, it's not like,
		2	Oh, you just made fun of a black person,
		3	I'm gonna arrest you
90	Zoe	1	/um-hum/
91	Ava	1	/It kinda/ stops like, /a useless/
92	Zoe	1	/-um-hum/
93	Ava	1	Um, like a useless, like… arrest
94	Zoe	1	Yeah
	x		(5 second pause)
95	Grace	1	I remember watching a movie last year

		2	And… um, there-it was about blacks and whites
		3	And it was like,
		4	I don't know if you guys watched it
		5	But it was like, this day where like all the kids
		6	Jumped out of windows
		7	And they're on the streets
		8	And it was like a black day kinda
96	Ava	1	Oh, like last year in school?
97	Grace	1	yeah
98	Ava	1	Yeah, /I remember/
99	Grace	1	/yeah, but um/-no, like, it was a movie
		2	And like, real people (unclear)
100	Kayla	1	/Was that/ near the end of school?
101	Grace	1	Um-hum

Kayla, also from the P7 class group, was another student with a silent pattern of participation. Kayla had an IEP for academic and social challenges; a girl on the Autistic spectrum, she was often not able to read social cues. In small group discussions, Kayla relied heavily on her group mates to help her participate in the discussion. If they got wrapped up in the conversation, she would sit and watch silently. Kayla was a good listener, though, and would sometimes ask questions in the group. More often than not, she was given a brief answer to her question and then the group moved on. In the excerpt from Ben's Fever Group in Table 6.36, Kayla asks a question at turn 121 and then tries to expand on Rachel's idea about the questions at the back of the book. It would appear that Kayla had read some of the supplemental material at the back and she attempts to share something with the group. Rachel cuts her off in turn 124, however, to return to the point she was originally trying to make about the additional material being called an "appendix." Kayla asks another question in turn 125 which Rachel answers.

Then, in a rare event, at turn 128 Kayla gets the floor and shares something she read with the group. Instead of acknowledging Kayla's comment or responding to it, the group just ignores her contribution and moves on. It is not clear if Ben was actually coughing, or if perhaps he was laughing at Rachel or Kayla. Ben was a highly intelligent young man who likely knew what an appendix is in a text, so he may have thought Rachel's original comment funny, and was just trying to hide it, or he may have thought it funny that Kayla did not know the word "appendix." Either way, between Ben's reaction in turn 129 and then Brianna's decision to move the group on in turn 132, Kayla's rare contribution gets ignored. Again, it is possible that peer status and power were at play in this group. Rachel and Kayla were friends from elementary school, but Rachel had been increasingly uncomfortable with Kayla hanging around her during school. It could be that Rachel chose to ignore Kayla's comment because she was with two of the most "popular" kids in the class.

Table 6.36: Excerpt 2 from Ben's Fever Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
120	Rachel	1	Oh, on page 244 there's a bunch of like, questions,
		2	that if you wanted to ask,
		3	they have the answers
121	Maddie	1	Where is it?
122	Rachel	1	It's like-
		2	at the last page
		3	But-
123	Maddie	1	There's like one about-
124	Rachel	1	-I know, but isn't it weird,
		2	it's called the appendix
125	Maddie	1	What does that mean?
126	Brianna	1	Yeah

127	Rachel	1	it's a part of your body
128	Maddie	1	Oh (Ben laughing/coughing?)
		2	I read this
		3	It said that the fever was actually real
129	Ben	1	Sorry, I'm coughing
130	Rachel	1	What?
131	Ben	1	/Yeah/
132	Brianna	1	/Okay/ I'll share my question
133	Ben	1	Okay

Similar to Grace, however, Kayla displayed a dramatic change in her pattern of participation in the final recording in June. Although Kayla had an average rate of participation of .54 for the year, with a low of .10 in a big group with several dominating personalities, for this final recording Kayla's participation rate was .88. Also similar to Grace, Kayla's average length of turn was higher in this final recording, at 2.37 utterances per turn instead of close to 1. Although Kayla's comments in this final group were not always on task or focused on the text, given her social development, the fact that she was initiating her own turns and engaging the girls in the group was evidence of her changing ability to participate in a small group. In the excerpt from Ava's Roll Group shown in Table 6.37, Kayla is "performing" her socially situated role of an academic by answering Ava's question with a multi-utterance response to explain her idea, plus Kayla then thinks to invite Grace to share her response, too, which she does in a multi-utterance turn.

Table 6.37: Excerpt 4 from Ava's Roll Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
66	Ava	1	Would you recommend this book to /uh,/ someone
67	Kayla	1	/Oh/

		2	I thought I would
		3	Because it was really good
		4	And it teaches like kids, like, not to be mean and stuff like that
68	Ava	1	Um-hum
69	Kayla	1	Do you agree? (to Grace)
70	Grace	1	Yeah
		2	And I-
71	Ava	1	Sorry (drops papers)
72	Grace	1	And like, people still like,
		2	Racism is still going on,
		3	So I think people who read this book
		4	Would understand more
73	Ava	1	Yeah

Both Kayla and Grace made strong growth in their abilities to participate in academic discourse over the course of the year.

The final student on the Spartans team who exhibited silent patterns of participation was Ethan. Like Kayla and Grace, Ethan was also in the P7 class group but had high peer status. He was part of a large group of athletic boys and he was a strong student. Ethan was also very shy. Ethan was nearly voiceless at times during small group discussions, speaking very little and having adjusted participation rates of .17 or .34. At other times, Ethan had more of a voice with adjusted participation rates of .59 or .58.

Upon closer analysis, I discovered that Ethan was virtually tongue-tied in groups if he was the only boy, such as in the excerpt from Brianna's Fever Group shown in Table 6.38. In this group Ethan is with five girls. Two students from Ethan's original group were out that day, so Ethan and his remaining group mate (a girl) were joined up with Brianna's group for the day. As shown in this excerpt,

Alyssa is trying to get Ethan involved in the discussion, but he is struggling. His quiet voice and giggles suggest he is very embarrassed. This group was also being video-recorded, possibly adding to Ethan's overall discomfort. The girls giggle a lot in this excerpt, too. Ethan was very popular with the girls in the class—many girls had a "crush" on him at this point in the year—and the girls' laughter in this excerpt suggests their own nervousness.

Table 6.38: Excerpt from 2 Brianna's Fever Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
109	Alyssa	1	So what do *you* think? (to Ethan)
110	Ethan	1	I think….
		2	Ah …I think someone….I think… (laughs)
		3	Maybe… someone… will get sick and die
111	Brianna	1	Like /(laughs)/
112	Mia	1	/That's not/ wrong at all
113	Alyssa	1	Like, could you be /more specific?/
114	Brianna	1	/Like, someone,/ as in Willie's family, or?
115	Ethan	1	Yeah
116	x		(group giggles)
117	Alyssa	1	Who do you think it will be?
118	x		(3 second pause - Brianna laughs, Ethan has big smile of discomfort)
119	Alyssa	1	I'm letting him talk (group giggles)
120	Ethan	1	I don't know… grandfather
121	X		(more giggles)
122	Rachel	1	Okay
123	X		(more laughing)
124	Alyssa	1	Why do you think grandfather?
125	Ethan	1	Because he's already sick

When Ethan was in a group with at least one other boy, however, he was able to participate more readily. In excerpt 1 from Dylan's Fever Group in Table 6.39, for

example, Ethan's participation pattern is quite different. The group is discussing whether Mattie, the main character in the book Fever, 1793, will continue to care for an orphan, Nell, even after the epidemic is over. In this excerpt, Ethan appears much calmer, and is readily able to expand his ideas, as he does in turn 94.

Table 6.39: Excerpt 1 from Dylan's Fever Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
91	Dylan	1	Well, ah (chuckle) well my question is,
		2	Do you think they'll keep Nell? Or Neil?
	X		(chuckle)
92	Ethan	1	Nell?
93	Dylan	2	Nell, Nell (said in a funny tone)
94	Ethan	1	Um, I think they will
		2	Because first, the orphan house is already full, kind of
		3	And she doesn't really want any more kids
		4	And then, uh, she really like wants to stay with Willie
		5	And so, and she has no other place to go
		6	Because they don't know if she has any other relatives,
		7	So yeah, I think they will
95	Alyssa	1	Mia?

Ethan's ability to "perform" academic discourse is seen several times in this same discussion. In excerpt 2 from Dylan's Fever Group, shown in Table 6.40, Ethan demonstrates that he is capable of inviting other group members to share, as he does in turn 123 when he invites Mia to share one of her discussion questions. Ethan also remembers to look back in the text for evidence to support an idea, as shown in turn 125, finally finding the excerpt he was looking for in turn 144.

Table 6.40: Excerpt 2 from Dylan's Fever Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
123	Ethan	1	Um, Mia, do you have a question?
124	Mia	1	Yes, I do
		2	I said, my question is, Do you think until the mother will die in a few years from like old age or, maybe the fever the yellow fever weakened her so she doesn't have um very good health? So do you think she'll die and why?
125	Ethan	1	Um, well…text example…uh, I have a text example
		2	I'm not sure where in the book it is
		3	Somewhere at the end when the mom returns
126	Mia	1	/Well/
127	Dylan	1	/'Kay,/ we should /look at it/
144	Ethan	1	Uh, hold on…..
		2	Oh, on page 237, when Mrs. Livingston, or Lovington, Mrs. Lovington-Junction
		3	It says she's supposed to "live a life of leisure"
		4	Those words mean
		5	He's talking about what um, what the doctor said to her
		6	He said she's supposed to live a life of leisure
		7	And then…Um…. yeah… (chuckles)
145	Mia	1	Wait, what page is that on?
146	Ethan	1	237

In the third excerpt from Dylan's Fever Group, shown in Table 6.41, Ethan shows that he is a deep thinker, capable of making connections between multiple texts. In this case, he is bringing up ideas he had read about in several of his classmates' blogs. As a result of Ethan's connection to the blogs, the group pushes their thinking into exploratory talk as they consider the possible chances of a modern epidemic as bad as the yellow fever outbreak of 1793 that they were reading about.

Table 6.41: Excerpt 3 from Dylan's Fever Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
188	Ethan	1	/Um, I have/ a connection,
		2	Um, what Alyssa was just saying,
		3	And Dylan's blog, it also was talking about, he also was talking about that
189	Dylan	1	Thanks, Ethan, for reading my blog
190	Ethan	1	A- about being bled and it just making you weaker
		2	It was in Dylan's blog
191	Mia	1	Ethan, you also mentioned in your blog
		2	That you think that /there could not be another epidemic/
192	Dylan?	1	/I didn't read Ethan's blog either/ (whispered)
193	Ethan	1	Yes, I did (chuckles)
194	Mia	1	Well, I think there could possibly be another epidemic
		2	Because…what? (distracted by whispers? Someone nearby?)
		3	Well, what we were talking…
195	Dylan	1	Well, um, since you're kinda just saying stuff and laughing and stuff
		2	So I'm just gonna cut in,
		3	Um, what was I gonna say?...
		4	Well, I'm uh, thinking about what I'm gonna say
		5	And I kinda forgot it
196	Mia	1	So-
197	Dylan	1	-wait, wait, no, I remembered
		2	Well, the H1N1 was kinda like the, newest thing (chuckles) that came out
		3	And like, you know how like, some people died and stuff?
198	Alyssa	1	It's been 17 minutes (whispered)
199	Dylan	1	Well, we, that was like the closest we could get to something getting really, really bad
		2	People getting sick and everything, um
		3	So like, I don't know if anyone will get sick /or anything/
200	Ethan	1	/um, I have/ a connection
		2	In Michael's blog,
		3	I read his blog, too
		4	And he was talking about the H1N1
		5	How that was-that was supposed to be like the big thing
		6	But it didn't kill that much people
		7	Because of like what Dylan was just saying

In these three excerpts, Ethan's pattern of participation more closely resembles a contributing pattern than it does a silent pattern. From the insider's perspective of a veteran middle school teacher, I had learned that for many middle school students, being in groups with their own gender makes an enormous difference in their ability to participate. One reason Kayla and Grace did so well in June may have been because they were in a group of all girls. For Ethan, being in a group of all girls, with two very popular and very pretty girls like Alyssa and Brianna, as was the case in the excerpt from Brianna's Fever Group in Table 76, may have contributed to his apparent nervousness and possibly prevented him from participating in the group conversation in a comfortable manner. Yet when he was in a group with another boy and with two girls who were not the most popular in the class, Ethan was able to "perform" the identity of an academic in a way that more accurately reflected his own intellectual ability.

It is interesting to note at this point that there were no students in the P6 class group who had a silent pattern of participation. This could be due to the fact that in the P6 group, there was little difference in adjusted participation rates for students of higher or lower peer status. In P7, however, there were large differences in adjusted participation rates between students with higher and lower peer status, as seen in Table 6.2 of this chapter, Average Adjusted Participation Rates by Overall Status Ranks in the P6 & P7 Class Groups. The fact that no students in P6 had a silent pattern of participation could be further evidence that there was little to no peer status effect on group work in that class.

This is not to say that peer status was non-existent in the P6 class group. From my insider's knowledge of the students and the observations I made as the teacher, I knew there was a deep social divide between students like Hunter and Lynn, who were the lowest status students in the class, and students like Robert and Morgan in the highest status group. Hunter and Lynn were never invited to parties, sometimes sat alone at lunch, and would be observed at the periphery of social groups during unstructured activities. Yet when working in small groups during ELA or social studies classes, there was no clear status effect among students in the P6 class group.

Distracting Patterns of Participation

A small percentage of student participation in the thirty-one transcripts could be described as distracting patterns of participation. Distracting participation patterns were more often seen in groups with weak facilitators and high levels of disputational talk, and were typified by students getting off task frequently, causing other students in the group to move off task, making inappropriate or even crude comments at times, acting in clownish or with exaggerated silliness, and generally losing focus from the task at hand.

Chris, a boy in the P7 class group, was one of the students who regularly exhibited distracting patterns of participation. For example, in the excerpt from Chris's Roll Group shown in Table 6.42, Chris gives his comments in almost rude ways, drawing out his words at turns 89 and 93, walking away from the group at turn 103, and saying "I could care less" at turn 103(2). As can be seen from the way several of his group mates respond with similar drawing out of words apparently in

jest in turns 92 and 94, Chris's group mates become slightly distracted and certainly step out of the "discourse of academics" for a moment as a result of Chris's participation pattern. It is unclear whether Chris chose to move away from the group because he was bored and "could care less" or whether he moved away because he was feeling insulted at the way Alyssa and Haani spoke in jest with the drawn-out words.

Table 6.42: Excerpt 1 from Chris's Roll Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
86	Haani	1	/Ok, ok, what do you/ guys think about the book?
87	Madison	1	/yeah/
88	Will	1	/I think/ the book was really good
		2	And had a lot of surprises
89	Chris	1	I think was boorrrrring (draws word out, long)
90	Haani	1	That's our blog question
91	Chris	1	Yeah, ow
92	Haani	1	Hey, why'd you think it was boring, Chrrriiissss (drawing word out in jest)
93	Chris	1	Because there was no aaaction
94	Alyssa	1	Aaacction
95	Will	1	Oh, so Mr. Morrison did-didn't-
		2	Okay, /so action/
96	Chris	1	/The only/ action part was when the bus, like flipped over (laughs)
97	Will	1	And when Mr. Morrison's cracking skulls
98	Chris	1	Yeah, now him-
99	Haani	1	-He didn't crack any skulls
100	Chris	1	Yeah he did
101	Haani	1	No he didn't
102	Will	1	He cracked arms
103	Chris	1	Technically he cracked backs (spoken from a distance- he walked to other side of room?)
		2	I could care less

A short time later in the discussion, Chris is completely off task, as shown in excerpt 2 from Chris's Roll Group in Table 6.43. He has moved away from the group and is sitting on an exercise bike (the group is in the Wellness Room). He tries to engage the group in a conversation about a movie he has seen in connection with a character in the text. Although Chris has a valid connection between texts, the group does not lose its focus at this point. Chris tries to get their attention six different times at turns 118, 121, 126, 128, 130, and 134, but they ignore him. Part of the problem is that Chris is not sitting with the group at the moment.

Table 6.43: Excerpt 2 from Chris's Roll Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
116	Will	1	/Madison?/
117	Madison	1	Well, I thought that it was, an okay book
118	Chris	1	Oh, /know what reminds me of Mr. Morrison?/
119	Madison	1	/And I thought it sends a good message/
		2	About like, what it was like back then
		3	Like how- what they had to go through
		4	/Just because-/
120	Haani	1	/Everyone knows/ what they had to /go through/
121	Chris	1	/Hey guys, guys/ (spoken from a distance - in the background)
122	Haani	1	No one just-just
123	Will	1	Yeah, luxury Mo
124	Haani	1	no one really cares
125	Will	1	Yeah, luxury Mo
126	Chris	1	Pssst-psst guys (whispered from background)
127	Haani	1	No I'm serious
128	Chris	1	/Hey, have you guys-/ (voiced from a distance)
129	Haani	1	/No one really says/ anything about it
		2	Because we don't really care about it, /anymore/
130	Chris	1	/Have you guys/ ever seen the /movie/ Green Mile? (voiced from distance)

131	Madison	1	/Exactly/
132	Will	1	/yeah/
133	Haani	1	/So-/
134	Chris	1	And the /giant guy/
135	Madison	1	/So this book/ is like
136	Will	1	/Yeah/
137	Alyssa	1	It's kinda like /showing/ it
138	Madison	1	/Showing/
139	Alyssa	1	/From the blacks' point of view/

At this point in the discussion, the group is clearly trying to maintain focus on a discussion of the text, but by continuing to ignore Chris they may be sending him a message that they are not interested in what he has to say. This could backfire and cause Chris to further become distracted. However, as we see in excerpt 3 shown in Table 6.44, in turn 145 Chris chooses to rejoin the conversation.

Table 6.44: Excerpt 3 from Chris's Roll Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
140	Haani	1	/It was made in the nine-/
		2	It was made in the /nineteen/ seventies
141	Madison	1	/yeah/
142	Haani	1	That's when people cared
		2	People don't care now
		3	Because now all the blacks are equal
143	Madison	1	/That's-/
144	Chris	1	/Yeah,/ /yeah/
145	Will	1	/Uh, not/ exactly, because, actually…
		2	Yeah it is,
145	Chris	1	/No, There's still /racism in the US, /A/

Later in this same discussion Chris says several inappropriate things related to Haani's skin color (Haani's family is from India) causing the girls in the group to

become uncomfortable enough that they came and got me to intervene. This discussion occurred in June. Although Chris had had some moments of group discussion over the year when he was actively and appropriately engaged, in each of Chris's groups the students found themselves off task or arguing with Chris part of the time.

Another student on the Spartans team who exhibited a distracting pattern of participation was Sean. Sean was in the P6 class group, and similar to Chris, he often had trouble staying focused on the task of discussing the text. Sean also struggled with staying focused on what his group mates were saying. Often his group mates would invite him to share and he would not be aware of the question under discussion, or even that he was just invited. This happens in turn 52 of the excerpt in Table 6.45. Frequently, as shown in turn 57, Sean would get the floor and then forget what he was going to say.

Table 6.45: Excerpt 3 from Paige's Tuck Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
49	Jacob	1	Well they might like- (background noise)
		2	Alright, my question is what if you were Winnie,
		3	Would you drink from the spring knowing that you would live forever?
50	Paige	1	/Um,/ I would wait,
51	Sara	1	What do you think?
52	Sean	1	Hum?
53	Sara	1	Sean what do you /think?/
54	Sean	1	/Um,/ Sean would wait
		2	and then see what I, what Sean would want to do,
		3	When he gets to however old the other people are
		4	'Cause then he could just like chill with the other people
		5	And live forever with them,

		6	then that'd be pretty cool
55	Sara?	1	What do you think, John?
56	John	1	Well I kind of, like the same as Sean
		2	Maybe when I come back when I'm like 25 ish
		3	'cause that's like a hip age and stuff
		4	And, sounds cool being a 25 year old for ever
57	Sean	1	And, back to Sean
		2	Um, I think that, I would um,
		3	I….. forget what I was going to say

Sean struggled with ADHD and even with a strong facilitator had great difficulty in small groups. He was much better at focusing and participating in the discussion when using talk tickets – they seemed to provide Sean with the visual structure he needed to maintain focus on the group conversation and not cut other people off or go off on tangents. Yet when not using the visual discussion markers, Sean did not appear able to monitor the dynamics of the discussion or to maintain a thread of conversation for long. In excerpt 4 from Paige's Tuck Group shown in Table 6.46, Sean does not remember if he ever said the "thing" he forgot earlier. Then, when the group reminds him that, 1) yes he said it and, 2) it was about being in the war, Sean goes off on that same tangent a second time, making shooting noises and taking the group off topic again.

Table 6.46: Excerpt 4 from Paige's Tuck Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
90	John	1	You were saying, Jacob?
91	Paige	1	ok
92	Sean	1	You were saying?
93	John	1	Jacob?
94	Jacob	1	yeah

		2	I was saying /did/ you want /to add?/
95	John	1	/Oh/ /yes/
96	Sean	1	Um, wait, I have-
		2	I have some stuff to add on
		3	But I, um, wait did I,
		4	Like, when I forgot my thing,
		5	Did I resay it?
97	Paige	1	Yes
98	Sean	1	I did?
99	Paige	1	Yes!
100	Sara	1	You said you would want to be in the war
101	Paige	1	And then you'd be like
		2	Shoot me, /I dare you!/
102	John	1	/And then you'd,/ and then you'd run up to a machine gun
103	Sean	1	I'd be like the Terminator,
		2	how I'd shoot somebody (making shooting sound effects)

Sean's overall average adjusted participation rate was 1.50, meaning that he participated one and a half times the proportional amount in his groups. He talked constantly, interrupting his group mates and often going off topic onto long tangents. He sang, he played with objects, and although he was always polite and ready to come back to task when his group mates requested it, he just did not appear to have the ability to stay on task. Groups with Sean in them had high rates of disputational talk and lower rates of cumulative and exploratory talk. Sean's and Chris's group experiences suggest to me that there is more work to be done to prepare students for participating in academic discourse. In the case of Chris, I needed to further work on ways to help students adopt the identify of an academic at least for small group discussions, and in the case of Sean, I needed to provide more group structure and self-monitoring strategies. Both Sean and Chris showed moments of strong

participation and clarity of discussion, indicating to me that they were willing to engage in academic discourse, but they just needed more guidance and practice.

Dependent Patterns of Participation

The final pattern of participation that emerged upon a close analysis of select transcripts I dubbed a dependent pattern. Dependent patterns of participation were characterized by students who would demonstrate a contributing pattern of participation when working in one group, and a distracting pattern of participation when working in a different group. Students like John, Hunter, and Will all fit this dependent pattern of participation. For these students, the facilitator appeared to make a large difference in their ability to participate as academics. If they were with a weak facilitator, these students were distracting elements of the group. Yet when working in a group with a strong facilitator, these students would engage in a high level of academic discourse.

For example, when John was with a weak facilitator like himself in Paige's Tuck Group, John had difficulty maintaining his academic persona. He started strong, as shown in the excerpt in Table 6.47. He was doing a great job inviting his group mates to share, as he does in turn 17 and turn 21.

Table 6.47: Excerpt 5 from Paige's Tuck Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
17	John	1	So Sean, what do you think
		2	What did you have for your, /question/
18	Sean	1	/Discussion/ question?
19	John	1	Yes, Sean
20	Sean	1	Well ,I had um, discussion number question number two

		2	What will happen to Mae when she's hung
		3	'cause it's not like she's just..
		4	they're gonna hung her, hang her
		5	And she's just gonna fall through it
		6	And be like a ghost and just fall through the rope
		7	Like, but she's not gonna like get strangled but never die
		8	And just go through a lot a lot a lot a lot a lot of pain
		9	So I don't, really know what's gonna happen
21	John	1	So what do you think, Sara?

But soon John loses control of the group and becomes himself engaged in non-academic talk, as shown in Table 6.48. In this segment the group is discussing whether Mae Tuck was right to knock the Man in the Yellow Suit on the head in order to prevent him from taking the little girl Winnie away. Here the students are suggesting what other options they had, and quickly move into silliness. In turn 228 Paige suggests buying him a new suit; she had been disgusted with his yellow suit from the beginning. Quickly John adds more silly ideas, such as putting the man in Jello, in turn 234, and giving him shock treatment in turn 249.

Table 6.48: Excerpt 6 from Paige's Tuck Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
227	Sara	1	/I would probably/ just threaten him
228	Paige	1	I'd buy him a new suit
229	Sara	1	And not actually like do anything to him
230	Paige	1	I'd, I'd buy him a new suit
231	Sean	1	I'd, I'd, No
232	Jacob	1	What time is it?
233	Sean	1	I'd do, I'd like incriminate him
		2	Like I'd like, /like, make him/ indecent
234	John	1	/Put him in jello/
235	Sean	1	So that when they find him,

		2	He gets charged /for, like/, public
236	John	1	/Being in business/
		2	Nudity
237	Sara	1	Salt?
238	Sean	1	nudity, yeah (snort heard in background)
239	John	1	/If they had that (???)/
240	Paige	1	/That's kind of awkward/
241	Sean	1	And then he'd go to jail
		2	And he wouldn't be able to do anything
242	Jacob	1	Ok-
243	Sean	1	And everyone would think he's a crazy guy who went to jail
		2	Because, he was like, they're neverlasting!!!! Yeah!!!!
244	John	1	/ever/
245	Sean	1	And they'd think he's like a crazy
		2	and he has to go to the crazy facilities
246	Paige	1	Ok
247	Sara	1	/Okay/
248	Jacob	1	/Alright,/ so
249	John	1	/and then they give him shock treatment/
250	Paige	1	/Okay, So, literary luminary time/

However, when with a strong facilitator, such as Robert or Owen, John stays strongly engaged on the topic during the entire discussion. John is clearly performing his socially situated academic identity in the following discussion. In the excerpt shown in Table 6.49, the group is discussing how come some people got sick during the yellow fever outbreak, and others did not. Logan brings up a point about one family living out of the city in a "nicer home" and John adds on to Logan's idea. John's turn here at 202 is characterized by a long series of utterances as he explains his idea, a very different tone of conversation than seen in the excerpt from Paige's group in Table 6.48.

Table 6.49: Excerpt 3 from Jeremy's Lucas Group

Turn	Speaker	Utt	Transcribed Speech
197	Logan	1	Because they never tried that-
		2	Because um, remember when M, uh, when Doc was explaining
		3	that there are some people that just get, healed?
198	Leah	1	And then others just like, are well for awhile
		2	And then they die
199	Evan	1	Yeah,
199b	Logan	1	it said that in the book
		2	Probably cause, they're just
		3	And, oh, yeah, because probably like, they live on a farm
		4	And like, the Starkley's aren't really a farm, I guess
		5	Because, I don't know, they seem to have a nicer home
		6	And maybe they have better hygiene and stuff
200	John	1	/And/
201	Logan	1	/Which/ could really affect how they got the flu and stuff
202	John	1	And they kinda-but there's only one bad side to that
		2	They're kinda in the city
		3	And there's more people
		4	And there's like more people on the streets and stuff
		5	So you have like a higher chance of getting the flu, though
		6	So technically, it would be kinda good to a, be rich
		7	And live on farmland
203	Logan	1	Yeah, rich, but he wasn't rich at all
204	John	1	Oh, poor person

When John had Sean in his group he was faced with the additional challenge of having a group member often off task. It is possible that had Sean not been in the group, John's facilitation skills would have been good enough for Paige's group to have a strong discussion characterized by equitable participation and high level talk. We see from these two excerpts, however, how very different John's participation was given the facilitator and members of the group. Clearly John was dependent on

group mate's who were strong contributors and facilitators in order for him to engage in high level discourse.

Another student on the team who had dependent patterns of participation was Hunter. As discussed in Chapter 5, Hunter had the lowest peer status in the P6 class group, yet for the most part, as long as Hunter was with a strong facilitator, he was included in the discussion and he brought up many excellent points for his group to talk about. Hunter also performed better when he was with all girls. When working in all-girl groups with Faith, a strong facilitator, he would have a great deal to offer the group. In Faith's Fever Group, for instance, Hunter told only one joke in over nineteen minutes of discussion. He never got off task or silly that entire time. The group ended up being a highly-successful group, as shown by the data summarized in Table 6.50. In Faith's Fever Group each group member had long turns, as shown by their average number of utterances per turn, and the group had no disputational talk and high rates of cumulative and exploratory talk, as shown in Table 6.51.

Table 6.50: Student Participation in Faith's Fever Group

Students	% of Total Group Participation	Average # Utterances per Turn
Faith	23	1.43
Hunter	14	1.39
Julia	31	1.63
Paige	32	1.45

Table 6.51: Percent of Types of Talk in Faith's Fever Group

Organizational Talk	10%
Disputational Talk	0%
Cumulative Talk	51%
Exploratory Talk	34%
Total	96%

They also had a good degree of equity of participation; although Hunter had a lower rate of participation than the girls, in Hunter's case it was a sign of his attempts to be more restrained and focused. In other groups Hunter may have had a higher participation rate, but it was often due to many off-task, silly comments that were not enhancing the discussion. As shown in the excerpt from Faith's Fever Group in Table 6.52 below, Hunter is a focused contributor to the group.

Table 6.52: Excerpt from Faith's Fever Group

Turn	**Speaker**	**Utt**	**Transcribed Speech**
137	Faith	1	If you could've changed one thing in the book, what would it be, and why? (3 secs silence)
138	Hunter	1	Oof-
		2	Julia?
139	Julia	1	Um, I probably would have changed that part…um…
		2	Well, at the end of-
		3	No, hold on, let me think
140	Faith	1	Yeah
141	Julia	1	Uh, I probably would've changed that-
		2	Um, when her mom came home,
		3	She wasn't like, /very sick/
142	Hunter	1	/Old, and like-/
143	Julia	1	Yeah
144	Hunter	1	She looks like, old and it said like she had like grey hair
145	Paige	1	/Yeah/

146	Faith	1	/yeah/
147	Julia	1	/Yeah,/ I think, um, I should've had been like, cured
148	Hunter	1	…/But she was like…/
149	Paige	1	/…but not really cured…/
150	Julia	1	But she was like, she was only,
		2	she was like really frail
155	Faith	1	Hunter?
		2	What would you change?
156	Hunter	1	(laughs) I would change/ the part, when, her grandfather died
		2	Like, I'd change it to like, if he actually like shot… one of the robbers
		3	And then they like, and they like, ran out
		4	Because he was my favorite character
157	Faith	1	I liked the grandfather
158	Julia	1	Yeah

Having noticed the difference in participation patterns for John and Hunter when they were in groups with strong facilitators and strong contributors, I ask myself if maybe Sean and Chris were never given the best opportunities to participate. Perhaps if Sean and Chris had been in groups with strong facilitators more often, and with other group members who were strong contributors, they may have been better able to gradually increase their participation in academic discussions. Some of the students that I thought would be the strongest facilitators on the team were not as strong as others, like Faith and Dylan, who I did not expect to be as good at that role. In future years, I will pay more attention to the actual performance of student facilitators rather than rely as much as I did upon students' performance in large groups and students' academic performance for an indication of who might be the 'best' facilitators in the class.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I summarized my analysis of the thirty-one small group recordings collected over the course of this study. I began the chapter with a discussion of the theoretical frames in which I located my analysis. I discussed sociocultural theories of learning, including work with small groups by Barnes and Todd (1995), studies of communities of practice by Lave and Wenger (1991), and sociocultural literacy research by Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007).

Next, I discussed my use of Fairclough's (2003, 2004) methods of discourse analysis, including his ideas of genre, discourse, and style to analyze the collection of transcripts for issues of power and status influencing students' opportunities to participate in small groups. I also conducted textual analysis to look for evidence of students "performing" the genre, discourse, and style of academic talk.

Also in this chapter I summarized Mercer's (1995, 2008) three types of talk—disputational talk, cumulative talk, and exploratory talk—and discussed my coding for these three types of talk. Along with examples of each type of talk, I explained my decision to add a fourth type of talk, organizational talk, to my analysis. I discussed my decision to use Mercer's types of talk as one way to measure the quality of group talk and the success of discussion groups.

I ended the chapter with an overview of the five patterns of participation that emerged from the data, including facilitating patterns, contributing patterns, silent patterns, distracting patterns, and dependent patterns of participation. I used Gee's (2004) theories of social languages, socially situated identities, and "Discourses" with a capital "D" to help explain my findings in relation to these five patterns of

participation. Finally, I questioned some of my instructional decisions in terms of how to help struggling students better participate in academic discussions in the future. In Chapter 7, I discuss the implications of these findings and suggest future areas for research in education.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Given the cultural and academic diversity of students in our nation's classrooms, cooperative learning structures such as literature discussion groups will likely continue to be an important instructional tool for classroom teachers. This ethnographic study conducted from a teacher-researcher stance provides insight into the culture and inner-workings of discussion groups in one middle school classroom. In this chapter I revisit the six questions that guided this study and reflect on the results of my data analysis. I discuss the ways the information from this study will help to improve instruction and learning in my classroom, and share what I believe are the next steps for me as a classroom teacher committed to providing high-level learning opportunities for all of my students. Finally, I comment on the aspects of this study that may be applicable to other educational settings, and I make suggestions for future research in the use of cooperative learning in middle school classrooms.

Guiding Questions Revisited

As described in the methodology chapter of this study, I developed six main research questions to guide my study. In this section I review each of these guiding questions as a way to organize the discussion of my findings.

Classroom Climate and Teacher Pedagogy

- What specifically do I do to develop a positive classroom climate in which all students can feel welcome to participate?

- What instructional methodologies do I employ to improve discussion skills and opportunities for learning in small groups?

This study was conducted from the stance of teacher-as-researcher. The teacher-as-researcher stance provided me with the opportunity to systematically study the relationship between my instructional methodology and student learning in my classroom. Having worked with sixth graders for over ten years, I questioned why some of my students each year struggled when working in cooperative learning structures. I was concerned that not all of the students in my classes were benefiting academically or socio-emotionally from small group learning activities. This study systematically collected data about what I did in my classroom to develop a positive classroom climate and the instructional pedagogy I used to foster social skills and discussion skills in my students.

At the beginning of the year, my teammate and I worked to establish a positive, structured, "family like" atmosphere on the Spartans team to support all of our students. The month of September was spent establishing classroom and team expectations and routines. I set the ground work for collaborative group work by fostering a safe, tolerant classroom climate beginning the first week of school with the creation of a classroom constitution. Early in the fall I began to implement the group skills/discussion skills curriculum I designed. I kept track of the results of student participation and learning and reflected on student progress during each step of the curriculum. I used my reflective journal as a place to re-think and revise my plans.

I began the group skills/discussion skills curriculum by collecting base-line observations of small groups at work. Over the course of the next ten months, I introduced progressively challenging social skills and discussion skills through whole-class mini-lessons, mock and model discussions, and through small group practice sessions. As part of the discussion skills curriculum, I introduced the use of discussion markers I call "talk tickets" as a way to make the discussion dynamics "visible" to students. The Discussion Skills Curriculum Scope and Sequence Chart is shown in Table 10 in Chapter 4, and the full scope of the curriculum can be found in Appendix B.

As part of implementing a group skills curriculum and fostering a tolerant, positive classroom climate throughout the school year, I conducted frequent observations of small groups at work. I collected data on a teacher-observation chart using codes for the discussion skills I saw happening in the groups. I provided the small groups and the whole class with concrete, specific feedback immediately after each group activity.

Finally, I provided an opportunity for student reflection after most group activities. Students were asked to do quick ratings of their own participation and that of their group, and they were encouraged to make note of any specific difficulties so that I could address their concerns before or during the next class. In addition to student reflections, I used my own reflective journal as a place to collect my thoughts about each day's group activity, including notes to myself about individual student participation patterns. I used feedback from these student and teacher reflections to

help plan for the next discussion skills lesson or small group activity in my classroom.

In summary, the process of documenting the practices I used to develop a positive classroom climate, along with my implementation of the discussion skills curriculum, has helped me to see that there were many specific pedagogical practices I used to foster greater student participation in academic discussion groups. Until I did this study, I did not fully realize how much I do in my classroom to nurture my students' academic selves and develop their group skills. This study has helped me reflect on and refine my pedagogical decisions and develop instructional practices that I can employ with students in future years.

Implementation of a Discussion Skills Curriculum

- In what ways, if any, do mini-lessons designed to teach discussion skills have an impact on the dynamics of peer status and student learning opportunities within small groups?

As an educator interested in fostering student learning for all students, I am concerned about issues of power and status as they may influence learning in my classroom. Participation in a literature discussion group constitutes an opportunity to learn in my classroom community of practice. If some students are participating at a low rate, research suggests that they are having fewer opportunities to engage in high level talk about the content under study (Barnes & Todd, 1995; Mercer, 1995 & 2008; Cazden, 2001). If some students are participating at a higher than equally proportional rate, they are having more opportunities to engage in high level talking and learning. I developed and implemented a discussion skills curriculum in the hope of mitigating

some of the power and status affects present in a middle school classroom in order to provide greater access to learning opportunities for all of my students.

The results of this study reveal that the discussion skills curriculum did appear to have an impact on the dynamics of peer status and learning opportunities within small groups for the two classes participating in this study. In addition, there is evidence in the data that the genre, discourse, and style of literature discussion groups worked to at least partly neutralize peer status. For example, by June, students with very low peer status such as Kayla and Grace were able to participate more fully in small group discussions. As students developed increasing skills with the genre, discourse, and style of academic discussions, the negative effects of peer status were at least partially mitigated. By June, every student on the Spartans team knew the structure of a literature discussion group and was able to "put on" their own socially situated "academic" identity, at least for a short time.

In order to guard against possible teacher-researcher bias, I need to consider here the possibility that these findings are coincidental or can be explained by the normal development of young adolescents. Yet two factors strongly suggest to me that these findings are significant. First, I conducted this study with two different class groups—forty-eight sixth grade students—and I saw a similar trend in participation rates across the Spartans team. Although the results were more dramatic in the P7 class group due to the wide status differences in that class, the data from the P6 class group show that students who were very quiet or were very talkative also gradually adjusted their rate of participation over the school year so that their participation rates began to approach the proportional rate of 1.0.

Two class groups and forty-eight individual participants may be too small of a sample to make any conclusive claims, but the second factor that suggests to me that these findings are significant is my own years of experience teaching middle school students. Being the teacher-researcher, I had a wealth of insider's knowledge about how middle school students generally function in discussion groups. At the time of this study I had been using collaborative groups and discussion groups with sixth graders for over twelve years and with eighth graders for several years before that. I had watched, year after year, as some of my students did not make clear progress with discussion skills, and others appeared to have truly "miseducative experiences" when working in small group formats (Dewey, 1938). Yet as I worked over the years to develop instructional methods to improve my students' abilities to work in small groups, I began to see evidence of growth in my students' discussion skills, but had never clearly documented that evidence before this study. This was the first year I implemented the full scope and sequence of my discussion skills curriculum, and it was also the first year that I witnessed the vast majority of my students performing at such a high level by the end of the school year.

In addition to the raw numbers of students' participation rates, the transcripts provide evidence of students "putting on" the situated identity of "academic" and "performing a text" during the literature discussion groups. For example, Kayla, a low status student in P7, was able to invite others to share by the end of the year. For the student in the class with the lowest peer status to be able to invite a student with the highest peer status to share during a discussion group strongly suggests that the influence of peer status has been at least partly mitigated in that group. Grace, a low

status student known for saying "yeah" fifteen times during a group but rarely offering ideas of substance, was able to explain her ideas in multi-utterance turns in June. A similar result is seen for Nick, another low-status student in P7 with an IEP with slow-processing speed. Nick began gaining greater confidence in small groups until he was able to get the floor on his own, invite others to share, and even question his groupmates' ideas. As shown in Table 89, Nick ended the year with a 1.11 average participation rate.

Also suggestive are the data from the P6 class group. As discussed in Chapter 6, there was little difference in the participation rates of students in the lowest status groups compared to the highest status groups. In fact, the students with average peer status had the lowest average participation rate at .95, but that is so close to the proportional rate of 1.00 that it, too, indicates strong participation. Students in P6 with low or middle status were not being left out of group discussions. Such consistent equity of participation is something I have not experienced in over fifteen years of using cooperative learning structures in my classroom. In my experience, students with low peer status can become increasingly marginalized over the course of a school year. Yet in the P6 class group during the year of this study, low status students were not being marginalized during discussion group activities when in my classroom. Even when looking at individual students like Hunter, the boy who had the lowest status in the class, the transcripts reveal Hunter "putting on the style" of an academic and being treated with politeness and respect by his group mates, at least for the duration of the small group activity. This, in combination with the increasing participation of low status students in the P7 class group, suggests a relationship

between the discussion curriculum and the decreasing influence of peer status on student participation in small group discussions.

If a gradual increase in participation is one way to measure learning, (Lave and Wenger, 1991), then as student participation rates increased or leveled out in each class, more opportunities for students' learning were being provided. Using the base-line observations recorded in my journal from the beginning of the school year as one data source, and the thirty-one recordings collected over the course of the year as other sources of data, I saw a shift in student participation patterns in both class groups after the implementation of the discussion skills curriculum. These data suggest that the discussion skill curriculum helped to increase students' opportunities to participate in high-level thinking and talking about the content under study.

I believe that the discussion skills curriculum described and outlined in this study is a valuable curriculum that educators can use as one tool to help defuse peer status effects in cooperative learning structures; with refinement, this curriculum may be adapted to other educational settings. The implications of these results may have enormous impact on how educators structure their use of class time and group work in the future. For me, as the teacher-researcher who began this study with a concern about students being marginalized and missing out on learning opportunities when doing group work, I saw these findings to be strong evidence that my discussion skills curriculum was working to empower my students—all of my students. Not only were students who may have been silenced in the past getting their voices heard, but all of my students were becoming increasingly self-aware and aware of their role in academic discussions. This type of meta-cognition is empowering for all children as

it provides them with more information about how to conduct themselves in the social context of the institution of school. In addition, students who are aware of the influence of their own actions and the actions of their peers will become valued members of the social and academic communities to which they belong.

Improving the Quality of Discourse

- In what ways, if any, are small group discussions improving in terms of equity of participation and development of high-level discourse over time?

As discussed above, the data show an improvement in equity of participation in small groups over the course of the school year. Analysis of the thirty-one transcripts using Fairclough's (2004) idea of genre, discourses, and style shows students increasing their abilities to "perform" the genre of a literature discussion group, applying the language typical of the "discourse" of a discussion group, and even developing the "style" or identity of an academic while taking part in literature groups. The work of Mercer (1995), Cazden (2001), Barnes and Todd (1995), and Gee (1998) suggest that academic discourse is something that needs to be explicitly taught. Analyses of the transcripts show students gradually adopting the language and style of academic discourse as they discuss four different novels over the course of a school year. The transcripts reveal evidence of students using specific social and discourse skills that had earlier been the focus of mini-lessons.

The quality of student discussions increased dramatically between December and June, as shown by the data coded for Mercer's three types of talk. As discussed in Chapter 6, cumulative talk and exploratory talk are the two types of talk that

include higher-level thinking. In general across both class groups, the percentage of small group discussions spent in cumulative talk or exploratory talk increased over the school year as the time spent in disputational talk or organization talk decreased. I can be confident that these changes are not just by chance. The large number of transcripts and observations collected over the course of a school year, along with the notes and reflections I made in my reflective journal as I adjusted my lesson plans to respond to the changing skills of my students, allowed me to track changes in students' and groups' discussion skills that corresponded with the discussion skills curriculum mini-lessons. These findings, in conjunction with student participation rates becoming more proportional, provide evidence of an increase in the quality of student discussions in both classes over the course of the year.

Impacts upon Learning

- What are the impacts, if any, of my pedagogical decisions? How are these decisions affecting the students and their learning? What changes could I make to foster increased participation for students who seem to be struggling?

Overall, the findings suggest that there are many positive impacts of the pedagogical decisions I made during the year of this study. Implementation of the discussion skills curriculum contributed to increasing quality of literature group discussions over the school year. Student participation rates increased for low status students, and decreased for students who may have been dominating group discussions, addressing my concern with power, status, and the need to provide all students with equitable opportunities to learn. In addition, student use of the parlance

of academic discourse increased, as did their general "style" and "ways of representing" as young academics during group activities.

With increased participation in academic discourse came a corresponding increase in students' ability to conduct and sustain high-level talking and thinking. As shown by an increase in the amount of exploratory talk occurring in groups, students were developing sophisticated discussion skills, including the ability to challenge each others' ideas, provide supporting evidence, and build upon the ideas and comments of their peers. By June, forty-six out of forty-eight students on the Spartans team were able to sustain a discussion about a text in a small group for over twenty minutes, delving into sophisticated topics such as character analysis, discussions about writing style, and author's choices during construction of plot.

Yet even with the success of small groups during this study, the study leaves me with a clear understanding of steps I can take to further help the students who struggle with working in groups. Students like Kayla, Grace, and Ethan who exhibited "silent" patterns of participation increased their ability to participate over time, but more can be done to support students like these. For example, a teacher might provide more pre-thinking opportunities for students with slow processing speed, like Kayla and Nick, so that they would have more ideas ready to contribute in groups. Some students, like Will and Hunter, needed to be with a strong facilitator in order to have a successful group experience. Other students, like Ethan were far more comfortable when working in same-gender groups. A good understanding of individual student needs would enable teachers to make informed decisions about

group composition, and might make small group work a far more beneficial and successful experience for students like Kayla, Will, and Ethan.

As discussed at the end of Chapter 6, even with the discussion skills curriculum and direct teacher feedback throughout the year, a few students continued to struggle when working in groups right up until June. Two students, Chris and Sean, did not appear to make the same kinds of "gradual changes in participation" as did most of their peers. These two boys never reached the same high-level of talk and thinking as did other students on the team. Groups with Chris and Sean were less successful in terms of the equity of participation, the group's ability to sustain focus on the discussion, and the amount of time the group spent in cumulative and exploratory talk. For students such as these, one-to-one feedback and instruction, along with direct supervision and teacher-scaffolding of discussion skills during group discussions, might promote an increase in the quantity and quality of their participation.

The Big Picture

Overall, the data reveal that forty-six sixth grade students from two class-groups were capable of high-level, sophisticated discussions. The final trimester of school during the year of this study was like every teacher's dream; a daily opportunity to work with engaged students capable of high-level academic discourse and the ability to work in small groups with a high-degree of equity of participation. For example, in April when we were studying the accomplishments and exploits of Alexander the Great, I knew I could introduce a discussion question at the drop of a hat and be confident that my students would respond with sophisticated, equitable

discourse. When presented with the question "Was Alexander the Great really so great?" students used evidence from texts to support ideas, challenged each others' thinking with counterarguments, and at all times kept track of the interactions of the group to make sure everyone was having a chance to share. I no longer found myself playing referee or police-officer; the better skilled my students became with academic discourse, the more I became the facilitator of learning, setting up increasingly complex and engaging topics of study for my students. Peer talk became the norm in my classroom, and for students of all academic abilities, engagement in and understanding of the curriculum increased.

With that said, I also need to note that the discussion skills curriculum took a great deal of class time, especially in the fall. Working through the qualities of each discrete social or discussion skill with students, including making "What it looks like/sounds like" charts, presenting mock discussions, providing student practice and feedback, and finding the time for student reflection, required an early commitment from me, the classroom teacher. There were days of panic in the fall and winter when I felt that I had not "made it far enough" through the curriculum. At times I wanted to throw out the whole idea of discussion groups so that I could "just teach" for a whole hour to make progress with nouns and verbs, character analysis, or the kings of Mesopotamia, whatever the unit of study was that day. There were days when I had to maintain a tight hold on my belief in the power of peer talk to engage students in high-level thinking and learning. I had to remind myself that by front-loading the year with lessons in discussion and group work skills, we would have plenty of time later for developing the content, and as a result of sophisticated academic discussion

skills, we could take our exploration of content deeper and to higher levels of thinking.

For this group of students, that commitment to cooperative learning and peer talk paid off. In two years since the data for this study were collected, class times at my school have been reduced to include a new period every other school day for the explicit purpose of improving standardized test scores. My school was one of hundreds of schools in Massachusetts that did not make adequate yearly progress for two years in a row with one or more subgroups. Even though 94% of our students were earning proficient or higher scores on the ELA MCAS test, one subgroup of our population did not make AYP, and we were required by the state to implement further interventions for our students. The resulting constriction of class time left less time for developing discussion and group skills in my classes. I have since noticed a significant change in my sixth graders' abilities to conduct an academic discussion with their peers; my current sixth graders simply lack the social and discourse skills needed to have high-level discussions. Although data from the last two school years is not part of this study, the findings from this study have provided me with strong evidence of the value and learning potential of peer talk in my classroom. This is a kind of "natural experiment" in which my current students have been the control group, the group without the discussion skills curriculum "intervention." The lack of my current students' abilities to engage in high-level thinking and talking, when compared to the results of this study, have renewed my commitment to taking the time to teach students the skills they need to engage in academic discussions.

Value of the Study

Although not generalizable across class groups, classrooms, or schools, this study is important to the education community in three ways. First, this study provides insight into the inner-workings of literature discussion groups in one middle school classroom. For example, thirty-one transcripts from two different class groups over the course of a school year demonstrate the importance of the role of facilitator in small groups, and provide models of "good facilitation" that classroom teachers in a variety of contexts may find useful. The scope and sequence of the discussion skills curriculum can provide educators with ideas about how to develop facilitation skills in their own students. In addition, the struggles of "silent" students and "dependent" students are made visible, and their increased success in groups over time may provide educators with a better understanding of how to help struggling students such as these find success in small groups earlier in the year.

Second, this study is important because it provides a detailed look at one version of a social skills/discussion skills curriculum that educators from elementary school, middle school, and even high school may find useful when developing their own cooperative learning methodology. Analysis of student and group successes and struggles apparent in these transcripts may help inform pedagogical decisions of classroom teachers as they continue to implement discussion groups with students in their classrooms.

This study also fills in a gap in the research on cooperative learning. Few research studies have followed the decisions and reflections of a classroom teacher as she systematically collects data to help inform her pedagogical decisions about

discussion groups over the course of a school year. This study supports the research conducted by Mercer (1995 & 2008), Barnes and Todd (1995), and Gee (2004) suggesting discussion skills and high-level academic discourse can be systematically taught to whole class groups of students. The recursive nature of this study provides a model to other educators who have questions about the relationship between their instructional methodology and the student learning that results. This study provides models of data collection procedures that could be useful to educators who want to better understand the dynamics of cooperative learning in their own classrooms. Data collection instruments such as the student sociograms and the teacher-observation chart could be revised to fit a variety of educational contexts.

In addtion, this study supports my belief in the importance of peer talk in learning for middle school students. The detailed discussion in this study of the gradual increase in student participation rates over time and the development of different types of high level group talk may further encourage teachers interested in using literature discussion groups or other cooperative learning structures in their own classrooms. Models of different types of student-talk provided by the transcripts, including models of "good" student facilitators in action, may help educators evaluate the quality of student talk occurring in their own classrooms, and may provide teachers with scaffolds they can use to further foster high-level student talk in their own classes.

Finally, and most importantly, the findings from this study suggest that power and status influences on the function of small groups in middle school classrooms can be mitigated by teacher actions. This study demonstrated that peer status sometimes

effects students' participation during small group discussions. However, these findings also suggest that a clear and steady focus on gradually developing students' discussion skills and academic selves can have a dramatic impact on students' opportunities to participate and reach high-level thinking when working in small groups. The results of this study suggest that when teachers make specific pedagogical decisions targeted at developing a positive classroom culture and fostering students' academic discussion skills, all students will benefit from an increasing number of positive, high-level learning experiences.

Limitations of the Study

Although collecting large quantities of data is generally a strength of a research study, in this case I had too much data, which turned out to be a major limitation of this study. In my role as a teacher-researcher, I was interested in two main research topics, either of which would have served as the topic of its own study. My primary interest was in better understanding the influences of power and status on the function of small groups in my classroom and on my students' opportunities to learn. However, it was not enough for me, in the role of an educator, to collect data only on power and status in small groups and changes in student participation rates. I also wanted to better understand the types of thinking and learning that were happening during small group discussions. I engaged, therefore, in a sort of dual study in which I analyzed the data with both topics in mind. This attempt to study two research topics in the same study created enormous challenges during the data analysis process, and may have led to less comprehensive results. However, at the same time I must state that by exploring both topics in the same research study I was

able to discover a clear connection between the types of talk happening during small group discussions, students' development of their academic selves, and the increased opportunities for all students to participate in discussions. Had I been more focused on just one of the two main topics, I may not have discovered this connection.

A second limitation to the study is it that it is mostly based on data from one type of cooperative learning structure, a literature discussion group. Although I used cooperative learning groups in my social studies classes as well, and collected field notes and teacher observations charts during small group activities such as building 3-dimensional models of geographical features and debating the qualities of Alexander the Great, I did not collect any audio or video-recordings of social studies group tasks. In order to develop a more accurate idea of the influence of peer status on cooperative learning in these two class groups, additional data from other types of cooperative learning structures would have needed to be collected. It could be that when conducting a science experiment or when working on a math problem, these same students would not be as able to look beyond a group mate's status or gender when inviting someone to share in the group task.

A further limitation to this study is the small sample size. Two class groups of forty-eight students is not a large enough sample to make conclusions about the impact of a discussions skills curriculum on the potential influence of peer status on small group success. More data across a variety of class groups would need to be collected in order to generalize this conclusion.

There are some concerns about the validity and trustworthiness of practitioner research, which may be another limiting factor to this study. However, it is the nature

of qualitative research to be exploratory, and to seek to discover new understandings in the patterns emerging from the data. This study is important because it explores cooperative learning structures and discourse patterns through the lens of the teacher, the person in the unique position of being able to explain the choices made when setting up small group structures in the classroom, and to then observe and reflect on what happens within the small groups, both academically and socially (Bills, 2001).

I would argue here that choosing a teacher-researcher approach was in fact the main strength of this study. My long experience working with sixth graders, coupled with my intimate knowledge of the students who were the participants in this study, informed my interpretations of student actions during group work. Because I had daily contact with these students, I had a greater wealth of information on which to rely during data analysis. Working with middle level students for over fifteen years also gave me the experience to distinguish discrete growth in skills in students from a changes due to human development or sheer chance.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study builds on earlier research on cooperative learning structures and the benefits of peer talk in classrooms. With its use of a teacher-researcher stance, this study helps fill a gap in the educational research on cooperative learning. Instead of recordings collected and analyzed by outside observers, data for this study were collected as part of the recursive process of one teacher's reflections on the impact of instructional decisions on student learning. My in-depth understanding of my students' experiences and training in group skills and academic discourse, along with an intimate knowledge of my students in the social context, allowed me to analyze

student actions and participation patterns and make revisions to the curriculum during the year. I would be interested to see further teacher-as-researcher studies as a way to increase teacher professionalism and sharing of teacher expertise across our profession.

The results of this study also suggest a need for additional studies on the topic of the influence of peer status on learning in middle school classrooms. The complex social world of middle school influences student learning in a variety of positive and negative ways. Students who have low peer status may not have the same learning opportunities as their peers. As Fecho and Allen (2005) note, teacher-researchers bring unique vantages on social justice issues. Issues of power, status, and social justice need to continue to be addressed in classrooms in order to avoid the "paradox of learning" discussed by Lewis and Moje (2007) in which children do not have access to the tools and identities necessary for full participation in learning communities. It would be beneficial for educators to continue to develop a better understanding of the nature of peer status and its influence on students in the learning environment. Further research may develop strategies educators could employ to counteract the influence of peer status during class.

Finally, additional research on the use of cooperative learning structures is needed, specifically on ways to implement high-quality cooperative learning with less time taken out of the regular curriculum to foster group and discussion skills of students. If, as Mercer suggests, there is a cultural value in 'educated discourse' and the "kinds of reasoning that are valued and encouraged in the cultural institutions of formal education….language which embodies certain principles—of accountability,

of clarity, of constructive criticism and receptiveness to well-argued proposals" then it is of value for educators to continue to develop an understanding of how to implement the learning structures that will promote this type of valued discourse for our students (1995, p. 106).

Summary and Final Comments

The findings from this study provided answers to my research questions and overall goal of better understanding how to create equitable learning opportunities for all of my students, regardless of academic ability or social status. For the first time, I had data from small group recordings to use as a way to measure actual changes in student participation, instead of relying on my own observations of small groups, from which my very presence in the group can cause student behaviors to change. The findings demonstrate a steady increase in my students' discussion skills and participation rates, suggesting a strong correlation between the discussion skills curriculum and the gradual increase in participation for students over time. Although the data also reveal that, even with the year-long discussion skills curriculum, a few of my students continued to struggle with participating in small groups, the findings from this study provide me with new information about what I might do to better support future students.

In addition to developing a better understanding of the dynamics of small discussion groups in my classroom, I learned a great deal about the influences of peer status on student participation and learning. The data is this study show peer status does sometimes have a strong influence in students' opportunities to participate. Through this study, I discovered the potential for academic discussion skills to

empower students in a classroom and mitigate that peer status effect. The transcripts provide examples of students "putting on" their "academic selves" as a way to help them enter a discussion. Students who were typically seen as having less academic ability found their voices and had many thoughtful, valuable insights to add to groups discussions. Of equal importance, students who would typically dominate a group discussion became self-aware and aware of group dynamics, empowering them by giving them a chance to invite another student to share. The impact on overall classroom climate as a result of these changes in my students' academic selves has important implications for me as the teacher.

I have answered my questions about the usefulness of my discussion skills instructional methodology and can finally say with confidence that there is real value in building discussion skills in my students. I hope this study may encourage educators who are interested in using cooperative learning structures in their own classrooms, and who continue to seek new ways to work for equity and social justice in educational settings. I hope this study will inspire educators to help students find their voices, empowering students to let their voices be heard.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT
Rhode Island College

Voices Silenced, Voices Heard:

Exploring the Functioning of Small Groups in a Middle School Classroom

Dear Parents/Guardians,

You are being asked to allow your child to participate in a research study about the success of cooperative learning groups. Your child was selected as a possible participant because he/she is a member of Mrs. Laura Chiaravalloti's class. Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to have your child participate in this research study.

Laura Chiaravalloti, a sixth grade English language arts and social studies teacher at Remington Middle School, and a doctoral student at Rhode Island College/University of Rhode Island, is the researcher conducting this study.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to help Mrs. Chiaravalloti and other educators better understand how to make cooperative learning activities positive learning experiences for all students.

Procedures

Students in Mrs. Chiaravalloti's language arts and social studies classes will be taking part in many small group learning activities over the course of the school year. If you agree to allow your child to be a participant in this research, your child will be part of small groups that are sometimes audio-recorded and sometimes video-recorded. Mrs. Chiaravalloti also may use some of your child's written work or projects as samples for this study.

Your child will not be doing different or additional activities than the rest of the class. Your child will simply be part of a few groups that will occasionally be audio or video-recorded while they are working on the group learning activity.

Risks and Benefits to Being in the Study

This research has no foreseeable risks to your child. There will be full protection of your child's records and grades, and his/her confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Your child may choose to drop out of the research study at any time.

There are no direct benefits of participation. However, your child's participation in the study may provide information that will help educators to improve children's learning opportunities during small group learning activities.

Confidentiality

The records of this research will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be kept in a locked file in Mrs. Chiaravalloti's home, and access will be limited to the researchers, the college review board responsible for protecting human participants, and regulatory agencies. The original data will be destroyed within five years. Audio and video recordings will be viewed only by the researcher and by Dr. Carolyn Panofsky, Mrs. Chiaravalloti's major professor from Rhode Island College. The audio and video recordings will be destroyed within five years of the completion of this study. Transcripts of the audio and video recordings will be analyzed by Ms. Chiaravalloti, Dr. Panofsky, and one other doctoral student, trained in discourse analysis and not part of the Remington Middle School community, in order to improve inter-rater reliability.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your child's participation is voluntary. If you choose not to have your child participate, it will not affect your child's current or future relations with the College, with Remington Middle School, or with Mrs. Chiaravalloti. There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not participating or for discontinuing your child's participation. Your child will be fully engaged in all of the learning activities of his/her classmates regardless of his/her participation in this study.

Contacts and Questions

Feel free to contact Laura Chiaravalloti, the primary researcher, at any time should you have any questions about this study. She can be reached at Remington Middle School at (508) 541-2130.

If you cannot reach Mrs. Chiaravalloti, or if you would like to talk to someone other than the researcher about (1) concerns regarding this study, (2) research participant rights, (3) research-related injuries, or (4) other human subjects issues, please contact Kevin Middleton, Rhode Island College IRB at (401) 456-8753 or write: Kevin Middleton, c/o Rhode Island College IRB at Office of Research and Grants Administration, Roberts Hall, 600 Mount Pleasant Avenue, Providence, RI 02908.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have received answers to the questions I have asked. I consent to have my child participate in this research in the following ways:

_____ I give my consent for my child to be audio-recorded and/or video-recorded while working in small groups in Mrs. Chiaravalloti's ELA or SS class.

_____ I do not give my consent for my child to be audio-recorded and/or video-recorded while working in small groups in Mrs. Chiaravalloti's ELA or SS class.

_____ I give my consent to allow my child's written work or projects to be used in this study.

Or -

_____ I **do not** give my consent to allow my child to participate in this research study.

This consent is null and void after June 30, 2010.

Print Name of Student Participant: _____Date: _____

Print Name of Parent/Guardian: _____Date: _____

Signature of Parent or Guardian: _____Date: _____

INFORMED ASSENT DOCUMENT
Rhode Island College
(Student Version)

Voices Silenced, Voices Heard:
Exploring the Functioning of Small Groups in a Middle School Classroom

Dear 6th Grade Titans Student,

You are being asked to be in Mrs. Chiaravalloti's study about the success of cooperative learning groups. The purpose of this study is help Mrs. Chiaravalloti and other educators to better understand how to make cooperative learning groups successful and fun for all students.

If you agree to be in this study, Mrs. Chiaravalloti will ask you to be part of small group activities that are sometimes audio-recorded, and sometimes video-recorded. Mrs. Chiaravalloti may also use some of your written work or projects as samples for this study.

When the school year is over, Mrs. Chiaravalloti will use data (examples) from these audio and video-recordings, and examples from your work samples to help her write her research dissertation (which is just like a big research paper).

Your name will always be kept private and protected. No one will see the audio or video recordings except Mrs. Chiaravalloti and Mrs. Panofsky (Mrs. Chiaravalloti's professor at Rhode Island College). You may choose to drop out of the study at any time.

In every case, you can be assured that your grades and relationship with Mrs. Chiaravalloti will not be affected by choosing to, or not to, participate in this study.

Statement of Assent
I have read the above information and have received answers to the questions that I have asked.

_____ I agree to be video-taped and/or audio-taped

_____I do not agree to be video-taped or audio-taped.

_____I agree to participate in Mrs. Chiaravalloti's study.

_____ I do not agree to participate in Mrs. Chiaravalloti's study.

Print your name: _____

Sign your name: _____ Date:_____

APPENDIX B

GROUP DISCUSSION SKILLS CURRICULUM

SCOPE, SCAFFOLDING, AND SEQUENCE

September

- Begin to establish positive classroom climate
    - a "safe" place for all voices
    - where risk-taking is valued
    - where inviting others to participate is valued and expected
    - where listening carefully to other people's ideas is valued and expected
    - where excluding behaviors are unacceptable
- Classroom Climate-building activities
    - Creating a classroom constitution with significant input from students
    - Fair Brownies
    - Team building activities
    - Gathering together "living room style" when reading articles, etc.
    - Establish supply managers & table coaches at each group
    - "Mistakes" messages and journaling
    - Popsicle sticks for accountability, compliments, and debate
- 3rd week of Sept – Whole class discussion of what a successful group looks like
    - Create list of Criteria for a "good" discussion (on a poster)
    - Teacher makes "base-line" observations
        - Which students dominate the conversation/talk first, most, loudest?
        - Which students never talk or get off task?
        - Which students are trying to participate to limited success?
        - Who are potential peer leaders?
        - Small group discussions in ELA regarding class novel – Acorn People
        - Small group discussions in SS regarding primary/secondary sources (9/11 materials)

October

- Classroom Climate-building activities continue
- Use rectangle "Talk Tickets" to make the discussion "visible"
    - Explain nothing except "put in a ticket each time you contribute"
    - Used Acorn People - What is your opinion of the ending? Do you think Ron Jones should have included the Epilog? Why/Why not?
    - Debrief – does the discussion "look" like it is supposed to according to our class-created criteria for a "good" discussion?
    - Analyze problems together
- 1st Focus Areas
    - equitable participation/ inviting others to share
    - body language
    - Facilitating skills
    - Act out pretend discussion for class to critique (with heavy emphasis on inequity and body language)
- Introduce Student Roles:
    - Facilitator – invites others to share, moves group through task
    - Time Keeper – keeps eye on time, monitors staying on task
- Practice discussions
    - Use "Food of the Gods" play:
        - Were the scientists "good" scientists? Explain.
        - What does H.G. Wells want his reader to understand?
    - Use SS 3-D model building – plateau & plain
    - Set clear expectations for inviting behaviors, self-monitoring behaviors, and body language
    - Use talk tickets whenever possible (not during SS if building 3-D objects)
    - Teacher observations and direct instruction as needed
- Debriefings
    - Whole Class debriefings – what worked well, what were struggles for group
    - Building competence – explicit examples of what students/groups did well
    - Student reflections – in writing/Likert Scale

November

- Classroom Climate-building activities continue

- Brainstorm ways to invite others & ways to let people know they are dominating (making skill explicit; sentence starters)
- Fish bowl discussion (without talk tickets)
    - Real student group discussion in center of room
    - Use "Monsters are Due on Maple Street" – who are the "monsters?"
    - Focused on inviting, body language, dominating behaviors
    - Classmates observe, take notes
    - Whole-class Debriefs
- Small group discussions (with new talk-tickets shapes- triangles- to invite)
    - Use Dar and the Spearthrower – Who is your favorite character so far and why?
    - Set clear expectations for equity, inviting, body language, avoiding dominating conversation
    - Remind class that facilitator is not the only one who can invite – anyone can
    - Clarify that a "turn" = content/idea (not just yes/no, agree/disagree) (model - making skill explicit)
    - Teacher observations to hold students accountable and provide direct teaching as needed
    - Debrief
        - Student written reflections
        - Teacher building competence by pointing out explicit examples of new and old skills observed in groups that day
- Use quick "Talk to your table…" activities throughout month to listen in for skills w/o talk ticket structure and provide feedback

December

- 2nd Focus Area – Reducing Interruptions/How to handle interruptions
- Act out pretend conversation (with heavy emphasis on interrupting – "stealing the floor")
- Brainstorm ways to reduce/handle interruptions (sentence starters, making skill explicit)
- Fish bowl discussion (without talk tickets)
    - Use Dar – Should Dar trade the sunstone for the spear-thrower? Why/Why not?
    - Focus on previous skills and new skill – reducing interruptions
    - Class observes & takes notes

    - Debrief
- Introduce new roles:
    - Reporter – reports conversation highlights to class (with Dar, reports back new cultural trait information about Stone Age gleaned from text)
    - Scribe – writes down new information group finds
- Small group discussions (use new talk tickets a few times)
    - Dar and the Spearthrower:
        - focus on finding new cultural information about the Stone Age
        - students come in with questions some days (skill introduced through Bloom's lessons)
        - some days teacher provides focus question
    - Set clear expectations – all previous skills, plus reducing interruptions
    - Teacher observations and direct teaching, as needed
    - Debriefings
        - Student written reflections
        - Build in time for Reporters to report
        - Teacher builds competence by pointing out explicit examples of new and old skills observed in groups that day
- Use quick "Talk to your table …." activities throughout month to listen in for skills w/o talk ticket structure and continue to provide feedback

January

- 3rd Focus Area: Using evidence to support ideas
- Act out pretend discussion for class to critique (with emphasis on evidence)
- Brainstorm what classifies as "evidence to support ideas" (making skill explicit)
- Practice pre-discussion preparation – gathering ideas and evidence
    - Use Tuck Everlasting – Why does Winnie want to run away?
- Fish bowl discussion (without talk tickets)
    - Focus on previous skills and new skill – using evidence to support ideas
    - Class takes notes
    - Debrief
- Small group discussions (introduce new shape– circles to ask for evidence)
    - SS topics: Is Sargon really so Great? Are Hammurabi's Code of Laws fair? Which empire would you have most wanted to live in? (with articles and texts)

    - Set clear expectations – all previous skills plus using evidence to support ideas
    - Provide time to gather evidence and ideas from texts
    - Teacher observations and direct instruction as needed
    - Debrief
        - Student written reflections
        - Teacher builds competence by pointing out explicit examples of new and old skills observed in groups that day and provides feedback
- Use quick "Talk to your table …." activities throughout month to listen in for skills w/o talk ticket structure and continue to provide feedback

February

- 4th Focus Area – Building on Ideas (to make <u>new</u> meaning)
- Brainstorm list of ways to <u>build on</u> ideas (sentence starters - making skill explicit)
    - Text to text connections
    - Personal connections
    - World connections
    - Adding on/stretching someone's idea
    - Asking questions or clarifying questions
- Introduce Literature Circles (with <u>Tuck Everlasting</u>)
- Introduce New Roles:
    - Literary Luminary – collects examples of descriptive language to share
    - All students come prepared with high-level discussion question (skill already introduced in explicit lessons from Bloom's)
- Lit Circle format & expectations
    - Agenda
    - Roles rotate
    - Set clear expectations – all previous skills plus literary luminary
- Act out pretend Lit Circle for class to critique – emphasis on Lit Luminary
- Fish Bowl a Lit Circle
    - Class observes
    - Debrief
- Lit Circles (total of 8-12)
    - Teacher observations and direct instruction as needed
    - Debriefed most days (time permitting)

        - Build in time for Reporters to share discussion "highlights" with class
        - Student written reflections
        - Teacher builds competence by pointing out explicit examples of new and old skills observed in groups that day
- Use quick "Talk to your table …." activities throughout month to listen in for new skills w/o talk ticket structure and continue to provide feedback

March

- Community Service Learning project
- Pairs researching and writing
- ELA MCAS testing (1 week)

April

- Classroom Climate-building continued
- 5th Focus Area – Disagreeing Politely (debating?)
- Act out pretend discussion for class to critique – emphasis on disagreeing
- Brainstorm list of ways to disagree politely/teach "rebuttal" (sentence starters - making skill explicit)
- Student Discussion groups
    - Lucas/Fever Literature Circles (6 total)
    - In SS - Was Alexander really so Great? (Debating)
    - Hold students accountable for all old skills
    - Teacher observations and direct instruction continued as needed
    - Debriefings (time permitting)
        - Continue to build in time for Reporters to share discussion "highlights"
        - Student written reflections
        - Teacher builds competence by pointing out explicit examples of new and old skills observed in groups that day
- Use quick "Talk to your table …." activities throughout month to listen in for new skills w/o talk ticket structure and continue to provide feedback

May/June

- 6th Focus Area: Critical thinking and expanding ideas
- Looking for evidence of students developing "communicative competence" and mastering academic discussions & group skills
- Provide individual feedback and instruction whenever needed
- Discussions continue in ELA and SS classes
    - Which famous Greek would you invite to dinner?
    - Roll of Thunder literature circles (8 times)
- Teacher monitoring continues
- Student reflections and class debriefings continue (time permitting)

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